

## Second to Last

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## Second to Last

by [babyblueglasses](#)

### Summary

The Avengers find themselves burdened with a disoriented god of chaos, and there is nothing glorious about it. With nothing to go off of, they struggle to make sense of things in Thor's absence. Despite his own turmoil, Tony is charged with demystifying the Norse god. It is an assignment that he is unwilling to undertake. A story of lives coming together after they've fallen apart.

### Notes

This work is Thor: TDW and Iron Man 3 compliant, so there will be spoilers.  
This fic is only available on aO3 and cannot be posted, duplicated, or copied anywhere else.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Tell him to clean up his own mess,” Tony said dismissively. He tried walking out but Steve blocked the doorframe with a squared shoulder. Tony glowered.

“Listen,” Steve said. “Tony. Please.” He took a step forward, and Tony took a step back. “Please sit down,” Steve said.

Tony did take a seat in the cold metal chair, but there was nothing compliant about it. He brushed his hand against his chin, leaning into it, waiting for Steve to talk himself out. It was easier that way. Faster. Then Tony could just walk away.

Steve dragged the chair beside Tony over the kitchen floor with a loud squeal until it was directly in front of Tony. The Captain sat down with a face not unlike the one that had been haunting Tony ever since the incident.

“I need you on this,” Steve said. His voice dropped down low, persuasive and just short of pleading. “Tony, you’ve been through things that make it possible for you to help other people.” Tony let out a loud sigh, staring pointedly up at the ceiling. Here it came. “You’ve lived your entire life in the public eye. All of your mistakes have been public. Every single tragedy you’ve been through has been food for the press and--”

“Is this supposed to make me feel better?” Tony snipped, cutting him off.

“The point is that could’ve broken a lot of people Tony, but not you.” Steve leaned forward in his chair, meeting Tony eye level. “You’re incredible under pressure. You come back from everything, Tony. It’s not your circumstances or other people that bring you back, Tony. It’s you. You’re capable.” Steve brushed a hand back through his hair, working up the nerve to ask Tony for the second time that day. “I think you could help him, Tony. I think he could learn from you and I think you’re the only person that can do it. I think you’re the right person to do it.”

Tony refused to meet his eyes. “You’re incredible, Tony. Just as you. You can get through to him,” Steve said.

“No,” Tony said, standing up from the chair. He braced his arm against its metal back. Tony had become slender since the incident, and thin in all the wrong places. “And no amount of flattery is going to make me say yes.”

“Tony,” Steve said, tugging at the man’s name authoritatively. “I mean it. You’re an incredible person when it gets down to the wire. I was wrong about you when we started. And maybe it’d help you to have someone to help. It’d be something to take your mind off Pep---”

“Pepper?” Tony snapped, possessively snatching the word from him. “I’m over Pepper. I’m fine. And I’m not going to play babysitter for that catastrophic tag along no matter how much ass kissing you do.”

Steve stood up swiftly, blocking Tony from the exit again. “Fine,” Steve said. “Do it to spite me and show me I’m wrong. Do it for any reason you want, Tony. Or just do it because I’m asking you to. I’m asking you to because I need you and I know you’re the right person for it.”

“Sometimes I wish you’d stayed frozen,” Tony muttered hatefully beneath his breath, ducking beneath Steve’s arm and shoving past him in the doorway. The wood pressed painfully into his thin back as he squeezed himself through.

“Tony!” Steve yelled after him down the hall. The developer ducked into a stairwell and jogged down six flights until he reached his bedroom. Jarvis locked the doors for him and cut off communications without comment.

He was too used to Steve’s pep talks to feel bad about what he’d said right away. He didn’t agree with anything the Captain said to him, so it all just felt patronizing.

Tony pulled up a monitor, calling up the security feed to the holding cell. He wouldn’t do it, he assured himself as he wrapped his arms tight around his stomach.

It had been a low blow for Steve to bring up the incident.

Seven months ago Tony had been on the receiving end of an affair, and it had shaken him in a way he’d never anticipated. Tony had never thought that it could rattle him so fiercely, but Pepper’s betrayal had dealt him a blow in a way he didn’t think was possible.

It had kicked out a foundation in Tony that was making him question himself in terrible, intimate ways.

He hadn’t even noticed his slenderness until a month ago, when a one-night stand had made a passing comment about it. The remark had been complimentary, but Tony hadn’t let anyone touch him since then.

Well, Tony comforted himself, he couldn’t be as miserable as the individual they had tucked away in the holding cell. He looked at least half as miserable as Tony felt, and he was only sitting there.

Sighing, he collapsed into his bed and made a phone call to Rhodey. That would make him feel better.

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“I know it’s me saying this,” Clint said, leaning in conspiratorially towards Steve, “but he is fucked up.” Steve sighed, his eyes rolling back into his head. “I don’t mean it in an I hate his ass way, I mean genuinely, scrambled and fried fucked up,” Clint said, leaning back away. He glanced over towards the one-way mirror where Natasha was making her attempts.

Steve cradled his head in his hands, thinking. He wasn’t entirely sure if he wanted to tell Clint. Though he could use Clint’s opinion. “I asked Tony,” Steve said.

Clint looked back from the one-way mirror. “Asked him what?”

“I asked him to talk to him and maybe...get through to him. God, I wish I knew what we were dealing with,” Steve said, sitting up. He looked hopelessly towards Natasha.

“It’s been five days,” Clint said. “I’m throwing in the towel. I’ve done everything I know how to do,” Clint said. “There’s nothing to figure out, Steve. Something got to him and it’s over. That mind is scrambled.”

The heavy door thudded with a loud click as Natasha closed it behind her. She shook her head, leaning back against it. “Steve thinks Tony should give it a try,” Clint said. Natasha’s suspicious eyes narrowed towards him.

“Why?” Natasha asked.

Steve pressed his head against the glass, watching. “Because if anyone has an idea of how he feels, it’s Tony.” Natasha nodded her head to the side. She wasn’t entirely sure what the Captain was going for, or if she agreed with him.

“If Thor had given us a little more than a hello and hold-on-to-him-for-me this might be a little easier,” Natasha said bitterly. “When is he coming back?”

Doubtful glances were traded around the room. They fell into a heavy silence.

“I thought I’d feel better seeing him like this,” Clint said. He cracked his neck, grimacing. “Just makes me feel worse.”

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“You know he’s a con man,” Bruce said later.

“No,” Clint said, popping open a coke can. “This isn’t him playing us.” He took a heavy swig. “I’d know.”

Bruce rubbed his neck. “I don’t know,” he said noncommittally. “Getting taken into custody so that he could play everyone like a fiddle was his play last time.”

“Which is why he’d be dumb to play it twice,” said Clint. He sat down next to Bruce on the couch. “I just don’t know what we’re supposed to do with him.”

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Rhodey was sitting with Tony at the kitchen table, eating carry out, when Steve came in that evening. “Hey there,” Rhodey said, greeting Steve warmly.

“Mind if I join you?” Steve asked.

“I would’ve brought you something if I’d known,” Rhodey said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Steve said, sitting down. He took a deep breath. Maybe it was wrong to ask Tony three times in one day, but he couldn’t pass up the chance of Rhodey siding with him. Tony could read the slight twitch in Steve’s mouth, the long breath.

“The answer’s still no,” Tony said.

Steve looked over at Rhodey for support. “Tony’s told me,” Rhodey said. “I...” He studied the kitchen ceiling. “I think it couldn’t hurt, but it’s up to Tony.”

“And I think you’re working on a lost cause,” Tony said to Steve. “Clint’s the shady spy and if he says it’s a lost cause, it’s a lost cause.”

He asked Rhodey to pass him a pack of ketchup, ignoring Steve. It wasn’t even that what Steve was asking him to do was too much or too difficult. It was just that Tony Stark was exhausted. He didn’t want to clean up Thor’s mess or play mind games. He wanted...well, he didn’t know what he wanted. Not to have anything asked of him, maybe.

Rhodey didn't say anything to prod Steve or Tony, and if the Captain had a quiet aside pleading with him that evening before he left, Tony was none the wiser.

Tony was back in his room, curling into bed. He glared up at the ceiling. Now that his arc reactor was gone, there was nothing to illuminate the space above him. It was only dark.

He didn't believe the Captain. The past few months had upset his life in ways he'd never anticipated. He hadn't expected himself to feel like this, or for things to be this way. He hadn't figured out how to fix it yet. He hadn't figured out how to make the comeback that Steve thought he was so capable of making. He hadn't figured out any of it.

So how in the hell could he do it for Loki?

## Chapter End Notes

This work cannot be taken and posted onto other sites. It has been locked to ao3 users only due to such.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

In an attempt to side step Steve's invitation, Tony brings in an expert.

Steve sat up, brightening in a way that irked Tony, when he saw the man. Tony sluggishly opened the viewing room door the rest of the way. Before Tony could even set foot inside, Steve was out of his chair. "I knew you'd come through," he said.

Then he saw someone standing behind Tony.

"What's she doing here?"

She walked into the room with bright eyes, extending her hand to the Captain. "Jane Foster," she said. "It's nice to finally meet you in person." He shook her hand politely, smiling diplomatically before shooting a questioning glance at Tony.

"I'm not the one going in to talk to him," Tony said with more than a little smug triumph in his voice. His words were crushed beneath the sound of wheels rolling down the outside hall. A frantic pair of clapping boots rounded the corner.

"Did I miss anything?" Darcy asked breathlessly, pushing her way into the room. She hoisted up a wheeled briefcase and dropped it on the viewing room's table with a heavy thud. "I had to check out the little girl's room. I heard there was fancy free shit." She caught Jane's warning stare and plowed on anyway with an amused smirk. "I was disappointed."

"Darcy, why don't you get ready to take notes?" Jane asked.

"Sure," Darcy said, sliding a notepad out of the briefcase and comfortably resting the bottoms of her feet up against the table's edge. She glanced over at the one-way mirror. "Wait," she said, pressing her face to the glass. "That's him?" She leaned away towards the table. "He looks different."

"A little less---" She flopped her hands around. "Mwa-ha-ha-ish."

"Thank you Darcy," Jane said.

Steve and Tony had been miming questions back and forth at each other, completely ignoring Jane's attempts at redirecting Darcy. "So Ms. Foster," Steve said, breaking his stare down with Tony.

"Jane's fine," she said.

"Jane," Steve said.

"He can't see us, right?" Darcy asked.

"No," Tony said, glancing over anyways. Loki was staring directly at them, and it was unsettling in a way that tied knots in Tony's stomach. His vacant eyes reminded Tony of a portrait that followed

the viewer throughout a room. He looked away quickly.

"I apologize," Steve said, "but Tony hasn't informed me of anything." The statement was more of an accusation. "I'm not sure I understand what you're here for, Jane."

Jane glanced back at Tony before answering. She had an inquisitive, excited air about her that seemed mistakenly cheerful beside a holding cell. "Tony called to ask if I knew anything about Thor," she said, "and that's when I found out that you had Loki. We've met before. Let me talk to him."

Steve's eyes trailed from her to Tony. It was difficult to read what he was thinking. "What have you heard from Thor?"

"Nothing," Jane said, pushing a lock of hair back behind her ear. Darcy grinned up at her from the table. "Nothing," Jane said emphatically towards Darcy's cocked eyebrow.

"Jane, I have to consider your safety before sending you in there," Steve said.

"I insist," Jane said. "I told Tony on the phone, this isn't something I can ignore." She stepped in towards the Captain. "Let me speak to him."

Steve stepped away from the holding room door in silence. "Smart choice," Darcy told him as Jane disappeared behind the door.

"This isn't what I had in mind when I asked you to get involved," Steve told Tony.

"Personally, I don't know why no one thought to call her sooner," Tony said. "She's the only other lead there'd be on Thor."

"Maybe Thor doesn't want her involved," Steve said.

"Then he could've said something about it," Tony answered.

Only then did they remember the other person in the room.

"Should I be taking notes on Loki too?" Darcy asked with false innocence.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Loki said in a languid, whispery voice. He grinned, leaning his head back against the wall.

His hair had fallen over his shoulder in limp, lifeless waves. A long slash cut the Asgardian attire he wore clear across the chest, exposing a thread barren fabric below. There was a set of neatly folded gray loungewear on the table for him that had been ignored. Jane found herself wondering if it was wise to leave any unattended items with him.

"I saw you die," Jane said in a hushed voice. Despite Loki sitting distantly on the floor, Jane still felt like she was too close.

"Get used to it," Loki snapped. Then he grinned again, wide and manic, his eyes disorienting towards the ceiling.

"How'd you do it?" Jane asked. "Why'd you do it?" No response came. It didn't even seem as though he heard her. "What happened?" Jane asked. "Loki?"

Five minutes later, when he saw the anxious woman perched up on the desk, it was like he was seeing her again for the first time. “Jane Foster,” he said, sounding more like his old self. “Does Thor know you’re here?”

Jane’s attention swiveled around the room in avoidance. “You’re useless now anyway,” he said, dropping his head to the right with a weak smile. His hands squeezed together, alternating between loose fingers and white knuckles without a pattern.

“And what does that mean?” Jane asked.

Loki rolled his head to the left side, staring at her with narrowed eyes. “What do you mean by that,” Jane demanded when the stare was too uncomfortable to endure.

It took him a while longer to grin.

Steve was leaning right up against the glass, his forearm just above his head. This was the first real two-way conversation they’d gotten. Tony was leaning back into a chair across from Darcy with his legs wide and arms crossed. He was waiting for the right I-told-you-so moment.

“So,” Darcy said to Tony. “What exactly is going on with Thor? Because I’m not really down with her getting all bummed out over him again.”

Tony frowned, staring distantly at the one-way mirror. “Shows up, dumps Loki off, says not to let him go anywhere and then Mario carts himself down Rainbow Bridge.”

“Hmm,” Darcy said, tapping her pen loudly against the notepad. Her notes were a collection of half-hearted scribbles and a clandestine sketch of Steve’s ass. She knew the whole thing was recorded anyway. “Usually,” Darcy said, “the Rainbow Bridge comes to us.”

Tony tapped his fingers against the table, staring at her.

“Thor’s god squad showed up a few months ago and…” She took out a tablet. “Don’t tell Jane I actually understand some of her stuff, alright?” Darcy stared at Tony until he realized she meant for him to agree.

“Your secret’s safe with me,” Tony said.

“Jane tracks the times and locations of the bridge,” Darcy said. She thumbed through a file composed mostly of numbers. “I only saw them the one afternoon but there have been ten visits in the past three months. At first I thought it was just Thor crossing back and forth, but looking at the times, I realized that at least some of them had to be someone else.” She slid the tablet over to Tony. “I’m pretty sure it’s god squad. Unless Thor has other buddies we’ve never met.”

The times and locations alternated between Thor’s time with Jane and his time at Avenger’s Tower. “Figure this out fast, alright, Stark?” Darcy said, only half playful. “I don’t want her losing sleep over it.” She flipped her notepad page over. “It’s a drag.”

Tony tried not to say anything. He didn’t mind Darcy’s concern, but he also didn’t know why everyone kept coming to him like Loki was his problem to solve.

“Amateur,” Loki hissed hatefully. Jane wasn’t sure if he was talking to her anymore.



“What?” She asked, only halfway directing the question at him.

“I could have faked a body,” Loki said indignantly. “You did not even give me the chance. I’m insulted,” he said. “You boring fools.”

Jane caught herself glancing back towards the mirror.

“He may be on his way back now,” Steve said, not breaking his attention away from the glass. He was responding to Tony and Darcy’s conversation, but he had only been paying attention to bits and pieces of it.

“Yeah about that,” Darcy said. “I really like the guy but Thor’s not the greatest at the whole timing thing. It was like, two years last time.” Steve tersely pressed his forehead against the glass. He was not prepared for two years of this.

They quieted as Darcy stared thoughtfully at the Captain. Loki’s agitated voice rose to fill the silence. “Five years, fifty years, a hundred. You’re a weekend to us. What could you possibly offer? What makes you think you’re important?”

Jane’s back was to them but Tony could see Loki’s pale face as he said it. Tony glanced over to see Darcy, but she had turned away to watch as well.

“No one gets to decide if I’m important,” Jane said. She stood up from the desk.

Loki met her wide gaze for another moment and then the lucidity was gone as quickly as it had come. His eyes wandered up towards the ceiling and then contemplatively towards the neatly folded clothes and then towards the mirror. When he saw Jane again it was like he did not know her.

“Where is Thor?” Jane asked. The question echoed off the wall. Huh. That question. He had heard that question a lot. They were all asking it. Why were they asking?

Jane didn’t understand why Steve was encouraged by the turn of events when she came back in. She felt immeasurably worse than when they started. “That was a disappointment,” Jane said dismissively. She smiled uncomfortably towards Darcy.

Darcy had the briefcase packed and ready to go. “We’ve got some sciencey stuff to do,” Darcy said. She waved goodbye to Tony with encouragement. Then she followed Jane out.

“Don’t think too hard about it,” Darcy told Jane as they walked down the corridor. “I’m sure it’ll work itself out.”

“Yeah,” Jane said too quickly, “of course it will.” She smiled, placating.

They had just gotten used to the sound of the briefcase rolling along again when Jane said, “I just thought I’d make a little more sense of things before Thor showed up. Of all of it, really...” She smiled forcefully again.

“I’m sure Thor’s got your back,” Darcy said. “He didn’t forget you. He’s probably just got stuff.”

“Yeah,” Jane said. “Of course.” She took an absent step forward. “Did you bring the notebook?”

“Yup,” Darcy said.

“Files?”

“All of them.”

“Pen?”

“Yes, but it would be a horrible tragedy if I didn’t. How would we ever replace that pen?” Darcy asked.

Steve’s attention darted between Tony’s smug grin and the Asgardian. “See?” Tony said. “You don’t need me for this.”

“I still think he’d respond better to you,” Steve said. He sighed, stretching his back. “I don’t know where that came from. Actually,” he said, looking in through the glass, “I didn’t know if he was capable of it.”

“I’m getting a little tired of cleaning up after Thor’s little brother,” Tony said. “The least he could’ve done is tell us what this is all about.” Tony would look at any part of Loki but his face. He knew Loki couldn’t see him, but that didn’t stop it from feeling like he did.

“He didn’t look good,” Steve said. “I...I asked him to explain when he showed up. He said he was at the limit.”

“Limit of what?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “You saw him.”

“In the ten seconds he was here,” Tony said. He wondered about the chart Darcy had shown him.

“It was a good idea,” Steve said.

“What was?”

“Bringing Jane in,” Steve said. He looked earnestly towards Tony with a reluctant grin.

“I have my moments,” Tony said. He rose to follow Steve out of the viewing room. “A lot of moments, actually.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Steve teased him, opening up the door to the stairs. Tony followed after him, his voice ringing in the stairwell.

A few hours later, the light in Loki’s holding room went out on a timer. He rose from the floor and slowly strode over to the one-way mirror. The viewing room remained dimly lit. He leaned his head against the glass, studying the now visible room.

There was nothing of significance. It was such a boring, dull room. He hated it for that. He didn’t know what he expected to see in the other room exactly, just that this was not it.

He pulled the stack of gray clothes off the desk and slipped to the floor. With the lounge clothes beneath his head he drifted off to sleep, awaking a few hours later to wonder where he was for as

long as it took him to return to sleep.

## Chapter 3

The wall slammed into his back, knocking the wind straight from his leveled lungs. He crumbled into the force before he could make sense of it. When he lifted his head, gasping and shaking, he was shocked to see Sif's sharp eyes staring up at him.

"Don't say a word," Sif hissed. She released him from the wall, gesturing towards a door beside them. He did as she asked more from shock than anything else, both perturbed and frightened by her anxiety as she scanned the hall before following him in.

Once the door was locked behind them, she turned to face him. Her gaze was cold and set. "Fandral," she said in a whisper. "Listen closely or we shall both be killed."

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"I don't see the harm in it," Rhodey said. His voice was wavering just on the edge of exasperation. "It's not like you're working on something else. You haven't even worked on that---" He waved his fork around, trying to recall the name of the device Tony was developing.

"Flux capacitor," Tony offered. Rhodey rolled his eyes as Tony grinned.

"Think of it this way," Rhodey said. "He stops asking and you make him happy. I don't see where you lose in this." Tony watched him eat his lunch for a bit, twisting his lip in thought, before going to answer.

Tony opened his mouth. "You just don't *want* to," Rhodey said for him. "I know." He had another mouthful of lo mein. "I'm just saying, I don't see a down side."

He scratched at his beard. Rhodey was right, of course.

"Fine," Tony said dramatically. "But only because I'm tired of the puppy eyes."

"You didn't get any puppy dog eyes from me," Rhodey said.

"Maybe a little," Tony said.

"No," Rhodey said. He shoved out an incredulous half-laugh. "Not a chance."

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"Of course I am certain," Sif hissed. "Do you think I would go to such great lengths were I not?"

"I only suggest that perhaps there is a misunderstanding." Fandral said.

"There is not," Sif snapped. "It's Loki."

"But Sif," Fandral said, smiling uncomfortably, "how would he dispose of the All Father? Besides, did Thor not witness his death? You are saying he returned from the dead and took the throne."

"It would not be the first time we wrongly mourned his death," Sif said. "I know not how he

disposed of Odin.” She rested her hand on the hilt of her sword, shifting the weight in her legs. “Do you think I truly wish to believe that such is true? I know what I saw, Fandral. Loki has glamourised himself into the All Father.”

“And what of Odin himself then?” Fandral asked. Sif shrugged, shaking her head. She did not want to assume the worst, but she was.

“If he is Loki,” Fandral said cautiously, “then there must be gaps in his knowledge. Things that Odin would know that Loki does not.”

“It is difficult for me to find reason to speak to him,” Sif said. “But I assure you that I have checked that for myself already. He has no knowledge of the things that transpired in his absence, and only plays along with the lies I tell. I am certain it is Loki.” Dread crept in as Fandral listened. “There is only one course ahead of us and I must know. Are you coming or not?”

“Of course I’m coming,” Fandral said. “How could I not?”

“Then you must not let on what you know,” Sif said. “If we are to overthrow him we must take him by surprise. We need to plan properly.”

“Have you told the others?”

“No.”

Fandral nodded. Telling the other two would be easy. It was Thor he was concerned about.

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“Alright,” Steve said. He said it casually, without all of the enthusiasm Tony had been bracing for. “Let me finish this up and I’ll follow you downstairs.”

Tony watched the captain put his charcoals and erasing stubs away in a metal toolbox. He had no idea what he was going to do. There really wasn’t a plan for what he was going to ask or say. Winging it seemed like the only way to go.

Steve flipped the lid shut with a loud clang. “Let’s go,” he said, walking towards the elevator. Tony pushed the floor button for them.

“So,” Tony said, uncomfortable in the silence, “do you uh, need something from him specifically?”

Steve nodded his head to the side, cracking his neck. “Just be yourself,” he said. Tony’s hand twitched. He didn’t like how relaxed Steve was being about the entire thing.

“What’re we going to do with him if Thor doesn’t show back up?”

Steve grinned uncomfortably. “Keep him here, I guess. I wouldn’t hand him over to SHIELD. Would you?”

“No,” Tony said.

The elevator came to a halt. He watched the doors roll open apprehensively, and treaded down the hall after Steve with heavy feet. Alone with Steve, Tony looked frail in comparison, eclipsed by the Captain’s stature and physique.

When they walked into the viewing room Loki was awake, staring listlessly at the ceiling. "I'll be right here if you need anything," Steve said.

"I can handle old reindeer games," Tony said, grabbing onto the doorknob. He grinned carelessly back at Steve, lying to the Captain and himself.

The door closed quietly behind Tony.

Loki glanced at him and then back up at the ceiling. Awkwardly, Tony walked over to the table. In the small room he felt trapped, and the god sitting on the floor did not ease his anxiety. Tony sat casually on top of the table as Jane had done, squeezing his hands together. "So," he said. "About that drink." He pushed out a shaky, fake laugh. Loki's head lifted, but still, he did not look at Tony.

"You're just going to have to take a rain check on that one," Tony said. "I don't think you really need one right now anyway. Me maybe, but not you." He grinned, just as falsely and awkwardly as before, feeling the strain in his tight facial muscles. Loki was listening, but not acknowledging him.

Tony's calloused hand drifted over to the neatly folded clothes on the table. They felt soft and safe beneath his fingers. "If gray's not your color we can get you something else," Tony offered. "Green, maybe?" He unfolded the shirt, holding it out by the arms to inspect it. "What is with the green, anyway? Did your mom make Thor's things red and yours green when you were kids and you just ran with it?"

Tony lowered the shirt, hopefully looking at Loki. He was studying the bright light above. "These are as nice as my pajamas," Tony said. He set them down in a rumpled pile beside him. "What's with the whole, uh," he gestured across his chest. "Cut thing?"

Loki began picking at one of his fingernails, listening to the tiny clicking sound it produced. Tony looked over his shoulder at the mirror. He wondered what Steve was thinking.

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"She's right," Hogun said. "If we make one false step and he discovers us, he will not hesitate to execute us."

"Letting him rule is not an option," Fandral said.

Volstagg let out a heavy sigh. "Some of the All Father's decisions of late make sense now." There were wry smiles all around the table.

"It all sort of fits now," Sif said sadly. "I had wanted to attribute it to grief over Frigga's passing."

"What will we do now?" Hogun asked. "We could simply ambush and kill him."

"It is Thor's decision to make," Sif said. "The throne will now fall to him."

"His Midgardian life will have to come to an end," Fandral said with sympathy.

"We shall have to go there to tell him," Volstagg said.

"Heimdall must be on our side," Sif said. "We have not traveled to Midgard as this since Thor's banishment. It will certainly raise suspicion in Loki. Heimdall must conceal us."

"He will," Hogun said. "Telling him is what shall prove to be the challenge."

“The sooner we get on with this the better,” Volstagg said. “There is no telling what schemes Loki has already put in motion. We cannot allow them to come to pass.”

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“Maybe we could get these in forest green,” Tony said, picking up the gray lounge clothes again. He had talked himself out on the safe topics, and the sad pile of clothing was the only inspiration left to him. “Emerald green? Do you prefer a shade or is it all the same to you?”

He kneaded the fabric between his fingers. The cotton was plush, and tempting. He might just have to get a pair of these for himself. Loki had not stopped flicking his nails against themselves. Tony wetted his lip. “What happened to your armor?”

“Taken,” Loki said. The response was so unexpected that Tony jumped a bit.

“How?” Tony asked. He waited, but no response came. The clicking pop of one of Loki’s nails returned to the air. “Why?”

“That’s too bad,” Tony said. “I liked the horned helmet thing you had going on.” It was a lie, but it sounded kind, and if Loki knew the difference he didn’t show it. His foot twitched at the helmet’s mention. “Look, if you’re not comfortable in American clothes, I can get you whatever you want. I’m a billionaire, alright? I’ll get someone to sew you Asgardian clothes if you want. Tell us what they look like, or give us those as a pattern, whatever.”

“You’ve been wearing that since you were brought in,” Tony said from his comfortable desk perch.

He was surprised to see Loki rise from the floor, and intimidated. His entire body went rigid as Loki approached the desk, acting as though Tony were invisible. The fabric in Tony’s hands was ripped away with one sharp tug.

At first Tony thought that Loki would strangle him with it, but instead, Loki yanked his own garments off. “Woah, okay,” Tony said, trying to look everywhere but in front of him. “Not expected.” Loki ignored his chatter as he tore the thread barren undershirt from himself and replaced it with the loose gray loungewear. The neck on it was too big and gaped open along his shoulders. Tony definitely noticed the toned muscle beneath, though he tried to pretend Loki hadn’t just stripped in front of him.

Loki bunched up his old clothes and tossed them in the corner. He returned to his spot on the floor, never once acting as though he was anything but alone in the room.

“Gray’s a good color for you,” Tony offered. The next nail click was exceptionally loud.

Tony quietly got off of the table and picked the clothes up from the floor. He sat back on the desk. “I’ll see what we can do,” he said. Bundling the fabric up in his lap, trying not to notice that yes, there was an odor to them, he considered if he should count this as a victory and quit for the day.

He rose from the table, and slowly walked towards the door.

“You look different, Man of Iron,” Loki said. Tony clenched the clothes tightly in his hands. He was not the one to be interrogated in the room. He wanted to reach out and take the door handle but his body had frozen in place, bracing itself. “Where is the contraption from inside your chest?”

Tony relaxed immediately. He turned around with the first genuine smile since he'd walked in the door. "You mean my arc reactor? Lucky you, I got rid of it. No reminders of your performance issues anymore." He perceived the tiniest, microscopic hint of a smile on Loki's thin lips. "Though I hear they have a pill for that now, not that *I'd* need to know."

He turned back and tugged the door open, realizing a moment too late that taking a jab of any sort at Loki was a poor idea. With relief he looked back through the window to see that Loki was no different than before.

He set the clothes down on the table beside Steve. There was food there. "Did you get carry out?" Tony asked. "Did you...did you *leave* when I was in there?"

"Calm down," Steve said, sliding a Styrofoam box towards him. "You were in there for almost two hours. I had Bruce cover for me when I ran out." There was a happy little grin on his mouth that he was struggling to conceal.

"What if he decided to go postal on me?" Tony asked.

"That wasn't going to happen," Steve said coolly, sliding Loki's discarded clothes away from them with a spare fork. "Nice job on that, by the way."

"I wasn't trying to goad Loki into a strip tease if that's what you're suggesting," Tony said, flipping open the Styrofoam box. There was a pulled pork sandwich inside and wedge fries.

"I didn't see that coming either," Steve said. "I was thinking, maybe we should move Loki."

Tony glanced through the glass. Loki had stopped clicking his nails against themselves and only sat there listlessly. "This room is secure, but we could modify Bruce's emergency floor to be just as good."

"You want to modify Bruce's bunker into a Loki suite?" Tony asked. He let out a loud huff of air. "When I was redesigning this building last time, after he smashed it up," Tony said, gesturing towards the cell, "I didn't plan on housing him."

"How long would it take?" Steve asked.

Tony rested his head against his closed hand. "That's building permits and construction and..." He sighed. "I'm not dealing with all of that."

"You're telling me you can't think of any way to modify the floor quickly?" Steve asked, taking a bite from his sandwich. "That doesn't sound like you."

"Don't sweet talk me, Steve."

"He can build fifty different suits but he can't modify an existing floor," Steve said to the ceiling. "That doesn't add up."

"I thought this stopped at me talking to him," Tony said.

"And making his clothes," Steve challenged him, nodding his head towards the abandoned garments.

"Okay, but his house?"

"It's not a house, it's a floor."



“It’s a project.”

“You’ll hire someone to do it anyway.”

“Jarvis! Steve is being pushy!”

“What would you like me to do about it, Sir?”

“Tony,” Steve said. “We’re all flying in the dark on this one, alright? Maybe Thor will show up tomorrow and maybe he’ll show up in ten weeks. We can’t keep waiting on him.”

“And that means?”

Steve shrugged. “It means that we do our best with what we have.”

Tony relaxed into the seat. It was just hitting him how utterly exhausted he was. “There’s no arguing that he’s done a lot of wrongs,” Steve said. “But no one enjoys seeing him like this.”

“So I’ve got a Loki suite to make.”

“Yeah.”

Tony met Steve’s eyes for a quiet moment before his attention wandered somberly towards the mirror.

## Chapter 4

“What’s up with you?” Natasha asked, setting down her book. Tony brushed past her and began rifling through the kitchen cabinets. “I thought things were good with you since—” Natasha stopped herself. She twisted around in her chair, resting her arm against its back as she watched Tony knock a box onto the floor.

Crackers burst from the open box, spraying crumbs across the tiles as they smashed into the floor. Tony quickly glanced at the mess. He said nothing.

“Yeah, well, a certain Peppery someone caught wind of a rather expensive use of Stark Industry funds for non-Stark Industry purposes, and one ugly phone call later, here we are,” Tony said, slamming the cabinet shut. “I can’t use Avengers funds because SHIELD would catch wind of it, and I’m not using private funds for this---” He threw his head back, sighing loudly. “Project.”

“Tony,” Natasha said. “Why don’t you sit down with me?”

Tony’s jaw set as he stared at the table. “Tony,” Natasha said softly.

“Tell me how it went,” she said.

“Unless you’re SHIELD pretending that you’re not monitoring my calls, that’s confidential.” Tony said.

“Not that,” Natasha said. “Loki.”

“You watched that on the security footage, don’t act like you didn’t.”

“It’s not the same as hearing it from you,” Natasha said, careful not to sound too interested or apathetic. Tony took the seat across from her only because it was a welcome distraction from thinking about the phone call.

Tony flexed his shoulders, shifting in the metal chair. “Not what I expected.”

“Worse?”

“Better.”

Natasha twisted her lips to the side. “What’s your thought on him?”

Tony shrugged. “None,” he said. “No idea.” He glanced down at his fingernails. They were grubby and too short to click against themselves. “I don’t know what I’m going to talk to him...at him about next time,” Tony said. “I burnt right through all of the things we had in common. It’s not like I know the guy.”

“So there’s going to be a next time?” Natasha asked, raising a sly eyebrow.

“I don’t know.” Tony brushed his hand against his nose. “I didn’t think I’d be able to talk to him without reliving the invasion. But when I look at him it’s just—” Tony flexed his hunched shoulders. “Blank.”

“Like?”

“I don’t know. I just feel removed from it.” Tony glanced over at the spill of crackers across the

floor. "I have too much other shit on my plate." Natasha nodded. "How's Clint doing?"

"Clint took SHIELD up on a therapy offer a week after the invasion. He's never going to like Loki, but it's not an open wound anymore, you know?" She brushed her long, straight hair back over her shoulder.

"He'll be alright. But you...are you sure you want to be in there with him, Tony?" She set her hands down on the table. "I only spoke to him, but he threw you through a window. That's a traumatic experience."

"I'm good." Tony cracked a hard smile. "I've seen more desperate cries for my attention than that."

Natasha decided to steer the conversation elsewhere. It didn't sit well with her to push Tony on if he said he was fine. "Why do you think Steve wants to change his location?"

Tony folded his arms across his chest. "Because I think Steve doesn't want to see similarities between himself and the parts of SHIELD that vanish people away in the night. That holding cell? Pretty SHIELD-esq."

Natasha inclined her head in agreement.

"The floor renovation is practically finished," Tony said. "So we'll transfer Loki there and he'll play Yahtzee or whatever until Thor shows back up." He rubbed at his eye. "The tailor's taking as long as the construction crew," Tony said. "And I won the argument with her, so Stark Industries will foot the bill. That green-eyed bastard had better be grateful."

Natasha glanced down at her book. "Don't hold your breath," she said. "Even if he understood the lengths you were going to, he'd take it for granted. He grew up as a prince. For him that's just par for the course."

Tony rubbed at his eye again. "Wasn't actually expecting him to be, but point taken. Steve's the one that should be grateful. He's the one that put me up to the whole ordeal." Tony considered going to look for Steve, but he was comfortable in the chair. He didn't exactly want to get up, and he knew that he could keep himself busy by talking to Natasha without worrying that she would get too serious. "What do you think about this whole thing?" Tony asked, suddenly curious.

Natasha's attention had drifted back to her open book. "Unless Loki escapes, which I sincerely doubt, it's not that interesting. I prefer field work." She turned a page. "We're just holding him."

"Don't you wonder what happened to him?"

Natasha's head snapped up from her book. She looked right into Tony's eyes before answering. "I worked with him for five days before you went in, Tony." He felt his heart quicken with an ambiguous anxiety. Natasha's lips thinned. Tony couldn't tell if she was choosing her words carefully on his behalf, hiding something, or just as clueless as the rest of them. "I don't think that he poses a real threat," she said finally. "And he's Thor's problem."

She flipped her book shut. "We've sent doctors and therapists in to see him, Tony, and yet so far, Jane has been the most successful. Why is that?"

Tony broke her gaze. Clearly, it frustrated her that she had not been successful. His eyes wandered towards the floor. "He recognized her, I guess." He heard Natasha scoff skeptically but did not move his attention from the cracker that had rolled beneath the oven. "I don't know."

"Sir, your tailoring order has arrived," Jarvis said. Tony stood up from the chair, stretching his sore

back.

He shared a quiet glance with Natasha before leaving.

The tailoring order had arrived in a heavy paper envelope. Tony took it up to his floor, where he popped open the adhesive seal.

A set of garments, identical to the tattered one that had been sealed in a bag and returned alongside the order, slid out onto Tony's coffee table. Tony stared at the jumble of sleeves and collars. They looked alright, he guessed.

He walked away from them and went to sit by the window. There was a long contrail in the clear blue sky. Smog scared the city skyline, and he could make out the occasional blare of a car horn.

*"We agreed. Work and personal are separate."*

*"How could I possibly forget when you've said it a million times?"*

*"You seem to be forgetting now."*

"Sir," Jarvis interrupted. "The construction is finished. Your presence is required to approve completion."

Tony rose up wearily from his chair, wandering towards the elevator. Words still echoed in his head as he arrived on the modified floor. He slapped on a smile and checked the contractor's renovations, trailing behind the woman with false enthusiasm before signing off on the work.

When she'd left and the floor was empty, Tony returned to sit by the window. There was only one slim slat of unbreakable glass that cast a long trail of light in the sterile room. Tony could just make out the contrail in the sky. The vantage point wasn't as good as his own room, but it would do.

*"No, stay. I need you."*

When sunset crept in Tony left his place at the window and threw himself down on the bed, staring at the ceiling. It was an okay room. Small, secure. Snug in a safe way. It was overwhelmingly gray, but then again, there was a lot of steel. In any case, it had a kitchen counter and a sink. The bathroom was completely new. There was an industrial, catalogue-esq feel to it that Tony rather liked. Tony rolled over onto his stomach. Why did he care? It wasn't like he was the one that was going to be using the room.

"Jarvis, tell Steve it's ready," Tony mumbled, tiredly rising from the bed. No reply came, but by the time Tony reached his own floor, he had forgotten about the message.

He kicked off his shoes, dragging his feet to the bed. Only then did he spot the clothes. "Damn it," Tony grumbled, grabbing them. He'd go throw them in the room's dresser.

Tony hoisted up the heavy bundle of clothes, nearly dropping them several times before reaching the elevator. They were made of a silky fabric that slid against itself, like the clothes were desperate to slink away. He hadn't been able to refold them in the slim, pristine manner of whomever had neatly packed them inside the envelope.

When Tony finally made it to the elevator he pressed the floor button and closed his eyes, leaning back against the wall.

He didn't want to be doing this, that was true. But if someone was going to be held in his building, if that made him a captor of any sort, he had to do this. It didn't matter who it was.

The thought of it sank down in his chest and simmered there. He'd been banking on Thor arriving and reprieving him. Steve might not have wanted to see parallels between himself and SHIELD, but Tony had his own parallels that he didn't want to see.

He turned the soft fabric over between his fingers. The clothes looked alright, didn't they? The room was alright, wasn't it? Maybe he should check it over again.

When the elevator arrived Tony hurried over to the security pad. He had to be approved through the second set of locked doors to get into the main room. Jarvis accepted him immediately.

Tony rushed blindly into the room, eager to check and assure himself that yes, this room was alright. Not a prison.

Loki turned around just in time to see clothing slipping from Tony's arms and sliding down onto the floor. The inventor swooped down to roughly grab them, swearing to himself. Loki cleared his throat.

"Oh," Tony said.

His back went stiff. Forcing himself to stand the rest of the way, Tony held the clothes a little tighter to his chest than was necessary. Loki watched him rise, absently brushing at a thread on his gray lounge clothes.

"These are for you," Tony said, his eyes scanning the room like he was looking for an explosive. He walked a few paces forward and set them on the counter. "I'll leave you then," Tony said, raising a closed hand to his mouth. He made a weak coughing sound.

"Steve moved you faster than I expected," Tony said in a mumbled excuse for his intrusion, not looking at Loki. He turned and walked towards the doors, running a hand through his dry, dull hair. He entered the first set of doors without looking back, and then the elevator.

Loki somberly watched the now absent space for a while before taking a slow step towards the pile of garments. One had slipped onto the floor in sad defeat. He bent down and lifted it up, holding the arms out wide to inspect it.

It matched what he had been wearing right down to the stitch, he would give them that.

What he had been wearing though was a ceremonial Asgardian garment only suitable beneath armor. In any other context it was uncomfortably inappropriate, like casually wearing funeral attire.

He stretched the arms out a little further, watching the fabric strain beneath the tug. It truly was a perfect replica. He let it slip between his fingers and back onto the counter to join its brethren.

The plastic bag containing the original garment slipped out onto the floor.

It hit the floor with a crinkling smack before collapsing in on itself. Loki picked it up.

He held the slim bag in his hands, gazing at the pile of clothes. They were belongings. Sure, the room had sheets and soaps and towels and utensils, but this inappropriate, misunderstood pile of clothes was his.

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“I was wondering what you’d gotten up to,” Tony said as Steve stepped into the elevator beside him. “What do you think of the floor? I don’t think Bruce is going to want to convert it back.”

“Bruce has never used it,” Steve said. It irked Tony that Steve said it so casually, watching the floor numbers light up as he talked.

“The contractor uses a design firm in conjunction with their planning. They put a modern sort of industrial metal theme to it that could be done in a limited time frame. It cost a fortune, but I handled it.”

Steve heard about half of what Tony was saying. He’d gotten a call from Fury about a team assignment while he was in the middle of transferring Loki to the new location. The floor looked alright and that had been all he’d cared to see. He hadn’t looked around. “And the bathroom can be reconverted,” Tony was saying. “There’s a green, eco-friendly element to the design as well.” Steve had been terrified that Fury had caught wind of the situation, but it seemed like everything was alright. He ran the conversation back in his head, just to assure himself that there were no signs that Fury was suspicious.

“Yeah, you did a really nice job,” Steve said as the doors opened to his floor. He glanced back at Tony in goodbye before leaving. He’d ask Jarvis to listen to the recording of Fury’s call. Just to be sure.

Disappointment crushed through Tony as he watched the doors close. It had been obvious that Steve hadn’t really been listening.

He arrived at his floor angry with Steve for the phone call he’d received that morning, even though Steve had no part in it. If Steve hadn’t asked him to change the floor, maybe he wouldn’t have gotten the call. He could’ve gone on ignoring the situation until Thor showed up and then forgotten all about it, and why couldn’t Thor show up now? What if something terrible had happened to Thor and Tony was spending all of this time resenting him?

Why did he have to be so angry with Steve for...for what exactly? A lukewarm ‘nice job’? Tony kicked his shoes off. They smacked into the dresser and rolled over on themselves. At last, he pushed himself into the bed, sheets bending back from him in a wake as he shoved himself against the mattress. He closed his eyes.

He couldn’t tell Steve about the morning’s phone call, because Steve would say the same thing about the situation that he’d said months ago. And since Tony wasn’t willing to take his advice, there was no point in bringing it up. Rhodey would probably say the same thing. Even if he didn’t say the same thing, he was probably thinking the same thing.

Tony yanked the comforter up over himself. It tucked in over his head, blocking out the little light that came in from the dark cityscape. They couldn’t understand. Tony couldn’t take Steve’s advice. He wasn’t ready to make that decision yet.

Even if the phone call sent him reeling, he still got to hear that voice. He still knew all the tones and inflections and that little pause right before that voice really lost its patience.

He tugged the comforter in closer, piling it up over himself. Tony was ashamed to admit that he still wanted to hear that voice.

He wasn’t supposed to want to. But he did, and that made it worse. It made him even angrier with

himself.

He didn't know where he fit into all of it, and it was so much simpler just to be mad at Steve.

Rain began to fall against the windowpanes, drumming up a steady thrum as he drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

Tony returns to old routines in search of normal while the new tower resident takes interest in his changed disposition.

The sky parted around him as he fell, directing Jarvis to locate the container. It was nine meters southwest. The thrusters flared in his feet, righting his course and bringing him into contact with the steel cylinder. “Bring it to target,” Agent Hill said in his ear.

Tony was on that, had been on that, knew the drill. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face. Heat seared through his tight chest, and no matter how efficient the suit’s cooling systems were, they couldn’t keep him from exhaustion. He opened his arms, letting the dead weight drop beneath him and onto the target. Somewhere below he heard Steve’s voice, quickly cut away by the sound of the wind and suit.

For a few minutes longer he stayed airborne, refusing to land in favor of remaining skyward. He knew Hill was close to calling it.

“Alright,” she said.

He opened his faceplate the moment his feet touched the ground.

Everyone was exhausted as Hill walked towards them, enviably sweat-free and rested. “Nice work,” she said. “Could use some more efficient movements, though.” Bruce, having just come down from the other guy and still winded, nonetheless managed to be the loudest grumbling out a complaint. Easy for her to say.

She picked at something on the tablet in her hands. There was more data on their battle simulation than she could ever use. “Nice work,” Steve said beside Tony, resting his hand on Tony’s shoulder. Drained, he kept it there as he struggled to stay focused on Hill’s debriefing. It felt reassuring to have the pressure of the captain’s hand leaning down against his shoulder plate.

“I’ve filled my training quota for the year,” Tony said a few minutes later as he followed Steve to an unmarked SHIELD van. The door groaned as Steve slid it open.

“You and me both,” he said, ducking his head down to get inside. Tony sat next to him, with Bruce sliding in beside them. Natasha took the steering wheel, and Clint rode shotgun.

Tony shut his eyes, resting his head against the seat. “Did you call Jane back?” Steve asked. Tony had forgotten.

“No,” he said.

“She’s called us three times this week,” said Bruce. They hit a pothole, jolting them in their seatbelts. “I feel for her,” he said. “For us it’s just work, but she’s got to feel slighted.”

“I can’t say I blame her,” Steve said. “I’d be wondering too.”



“Did she discover anything new?” Tony asked, sliding in the seat as Natasha rounded a sharp turn.

“Not that she said,” Bruce replied.

“Me either,” said Tony. He didn’t care about Thor or Jane at that moment. He just wanted to get out of his sweaty under suit and soak his aching muscles in a hot bath.

“Stop at the store,” Clint said to Natasha. “I want to buy some beer.”

---

That evening found Tony, Clint, and Steve lying across the common room couches, watching television in varying states of exhaustion. Bruce had left with Natasha to get carry out thirty minutes ago and gotten stuck in traffic.

Natasha slammed the cartons on the table when they came in, but that was the full extent of her frustration. Bruce said a few snippy things about New York drivers as he passed around plastic forks, but as soon as they’d all settled in they forgot about the delay.

It wasn’t until much later, when everyone was quietly slouching away to their own haunts, that Steve quietly suggested to Tony that he could take some of the leftovers to Loki.

“He gets his own food,” Tony said. “It’s not like he’s starving.”

Steve clipped the lid shut on the carryout container. “True,” he said, “but he might like to try this.” He stacked up the remaining containers against his arm, cradling them as he held the other arm out to Tony. “Take it.”

Tony glanced down at the out stretched hand. “Nah,” he said. “I’ve got a date with my whirlpool bath and the rest of this,” he said, picking up his half-finished beer. “Deranged demigods aren’t anywhere on that list.” He walked off to the elevator. Steve quietly added the container to the stack in his arms. He abandoned them in the messy refrigerator beside a bottle of expired juice.

---

“Sir, there is a message waiting for you,” Jarvis said as Tony finished dressing. He fidgeted with his dress collar, adjusting the button. “Shall I play it?”

“Go for it, Jarv.”

Jane’s voice filled the room, anxiously bobbing up and down. She hadn’t found anything new, she was just wondering. Tony called her back. “No, I haven’t found anything,” he said. “But I’d like you to take a look at something for me. Do you have a computer in front of you?”

Tony waited as he heard papers being shoved aside. “Okay,” she said.

“I’m sending you some files. Take a look through them and let me know if you find anything interesting.”

He waited for the files to download on Jane’s end, making polite chatter with her. Jane gasped when she opened the first file. “But these are—”

“Classified. Yeah. I don’t think I have to tell you not to tattle to SHIELD, do I?”

There was the flurry of typing keys on the other end. “Tony,” she said. “These are my files. These are my files, and fifty new things.” She sounded incredibly excited. “This is everything they worked on after they stole my research.” A tiny grin crept up onto the corner of Tony’s mouth.

“Oh my god,” Jane said, clicking away furiously at something. “Look at what they’ve done to this! I didn’t have the grant money to get the equipment to test my theory. They’ve taken it further than I thought—Tony, thank you.” He was grinning on the other line. Jane was elated, and it was delightful to listen to.

“For what?” Tony asked. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Jane smiled on her end, holding the phone still against her face. “Now I have a meeting to get to. I’ll let you know if the big guy makes an appearance.”

“Thank you,” Jane said. The line cut out.

She set her phone down. File after file opened on her screen. There had been stolen things that SHIELD had kept, even after they formed a shaky alliance with Jane. Files would go missing after consultant meetings, and she’d always had a suspicion that they were downloading her private work. This not only confirmed it, but showed what SHIELD’s in house team had accomplished.

She could take it further.

This was wonderful. It would also keep her busy for weeks if not months, and she loved Tony a little for that.

---

Tony looked more like his old self in a suit and tie, and he was more than ready to play the part. He’d show up at some business meetings, wipe the floor with whoever was negotiating with them, and then party his way through disgustingly extravagant after parties until he either blacked out or went home with someone or both.

If he couldn’t feel like his old normal, he could at least act like his old normal. He could pretend. And maybe it would work and by the end of it he would feel normal again and stop thinking about phone calls and strawberry blond hair.

And he did do just that. And it did work, all through the business meetings and down through three different parties. It worked past the end of the night when he followed a woman back to her Manhattan apartment and had loud, rough sex that he hoped her neighbors would be appalled by. He fell asleep satisfied.

It wasn’t until the morning that the spell wore off.

He woke up first and wandered off to the master bathroom to find a toothbrush. He just had to brush his teeth. There wasn’t a clear reason, he just wanted clean teeth and he wanted them now. It could not wait. He fixated on it, pulling open drawer after drawer. There were cotton swabs and panty liners, teeth whitening strips and q-tips, a jar with years worth of hotel soaps, twenty different hair conditioners, a bottle of baby lotion, bottles of prescriptions with different names on the labels, a scummy used bar soap that had been shoved back into a corner and forgotten, a vibrator, and six packs of towelettes, but not one fucking toothbrush.

He stood back up, breathing a little heavier, staring into the mirror. He gripped the marble countertop tightly. He was supposed to be done with this.

He was supposed to know where the toothbrushes were kept, not rifling through the personal effects of a stranger. He was supposed to have a fucking toothbrush.

Tony was furious. He'd been okay with leaving this life behind him. He'd been ready for stationary. He'd been ready for waking up beside the same face for the rest of his life in a bed that was his own. But it was all gone. He didn't even get a fucking choice in the matter. And he was furious. God, was he furious.

He didn't want to return to this life anymore and he didn't have a different one to return to. There was only new ahead of him, or more bland, ashy versions of this one.

The woman was still asleep. He showed himself out.

---

Tony couldn't decide if the tower felt like coming home or not. He took a back entrance, avoiding the front lobby. As he stepped into the elevator, it occurred to him that his toothbrush was here, and that was a nice thought.

Three floors up the doors opened and Clint stepped in. "Hey," he said, grinning mischievously. "Look at you and your walk of shame. Good for you." He punched a button for two floors up. "Oh yeah, Bruce was looking for you." He grinned back congratulatory at Tony again, winking like a schoolboy, before leaving the elevator.

In the past Tony would've thrown quips playfully back at Clint, but it just felt hollow. As Tony arrived on his own floor Jarvis informed him that Bruce had been inviting him to hang out for dinner. He sent back an acceptance as he walked towards his bathroom.

His toothbrush was waiting right on the sink.

He calmed down a little when the bristles hit his gums, paste dripping from his mouth.

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"Tony," Steve said. "Look, I know you're going to think this is me trying to arrange something, but it's not. I don't know what I'm looking at."

Tony sat back from his screen, delicately considering the captain's tone. It sounded sincere enough.

The toothbrush incident had occurred three days ago. It had been forgotten, like other, similar incidents before it. Tony had gone to dinner with Bruce since then, and a jog with Rhodey. He was in the lab again, tinkering. Things felt normal enough. "Please," Steve said with exasperation.

"Fine," Tony said. "I'll come look at it."

He grabbed a screwdriver and headed towards the captain's call and Loki's floor. When he came in through the security door, Steve was staring uncomfortably at the ceiling right beside the offending light switch. Loki was lying on the bed, staring at the captain with malicious curiosity. Steve relaxed when he saw Tony.

Tony took the screwdriver out of his back pocket and began examining the light switch, unscrewing it from the wall. "I'm just going to install a new one," he said. "I need to get my voltage tester. It's not a big deal," he said. "It'll just take a minute."

Steve glanced back anxiously at Loki when Tony had left. This was the first entertainment that Loki'd had in days. Steve didn't like that he seemed to be hoping for things to get worse. "It'll be fine," he stated stiffly, trying to assure Loki and himself that there would be no destruction for Loki to enjoy. Loki just tilted his head to the side, his eyes implying that he disagreed.

Tony returned and left the room a couple of times, disappointing Steve and Loki accordingly. As he fussed with the switch, trading out the old one for a new one, he realized that he'd sort of forgotten that Loki's floor had existed. It had been nice not to feel guilty or responsible for a few days.

He glanced over at Loki. He was wearing one of the tailored garments. That was good, right?

"See? Easy," he told Steve. "I'll teach you how to do it next time."

"Okay," Steve said without enthusiasm.

Tony bent down to pick the rest of his tools off the floor. "You go ahead," he told Steve. "I'll be up in a minute."

When Steve had left Tony stood, holding a bag with the old switch and his tools. Loki was staring up at the ceiling now, ignoring him. Tony glanced around the room, loudly blowing a breath out. Nothing had really changed. The clothes were all tucked away, but otherwise, the room still looked new. He wondered if Loki knew what the small TV in the wall was, or how to use it.

"What kind of books do you read?" Tony asked. Loki stayed still on the bed, his eyes wandering thoughtfully to the side. Tony wasn't sure what was going through his head. "Or music?" Tony looked towards the door, debating if it was his cue to go. He had tried and that was good enough for him today.

Loki leaned up from the bed, propping himself up on his elbows. "Any book would be preferable to none."

"Okay," Tony said. He'd send some books down then. Tony took a step towards the door.

"Perhaps you could describe my options."

"Whatever's at the bookstore," Tony said bluntly, without thought. Loki blinked once, minutely biting his lip.

"I have not had the opportunity to visit your bookstores," Loki said. He gestured to the room spitefully.

Tony set the bag down on the counter. "Well," he said. It had been a long time since he had been to a bookstore. "There's fiction. Non-fiction, and---" His brain informed him that this would've been the sort of thing that Pepper would've been good at handling. "Well what do you like?" He asked, sounding disproportionately annoyed.

"Nothing dull," Loki said. "Well-written. I am not entirely sure of what you Midgardians are capable of."

What a pretentious prat. Tony's annoyance registered in his face, and Loki saw his opportunity

leaving. "I am sure you are capable of choosing something adequate, Man of Iron."

Tony wasn't sure he wanted Loki calling him that, and he wasn't sure he wanted him using his name, either. "I'll see what I can do." He picked the bag up off the counter and began walking towards the door.

"Might I ask a favor of you?"

"You mean another one," Tony said, his hand just inches from the door.

"Yes," Loki said. Tony waited. With his back turned, he did not see Loki fumble, lose focus and recapture his thoughts. It only seemed to him that Loki was deliberately taking his time, carefully selecting his words. "I would like other clothes. These are not meant for this in Asgard." Tony pulled in a heavy breath, glaring crossly at the ceiling. Couldn't he have said something about it before? Tony's glare dropped to the door. He could just leave.

Loki watched Tony's back, sharply awaiting what the man would do. He would not beg. He would've demanded, if he hadn't known better. Wasn't asking for something embarrassing enough?

"I'll see what I can do," Tony said. Loki saw his hand tighten to a fist and relax again. "Do they have to be Asgardian or..."

"Midgardian is fine."

"Great," Tony said.

Loki watched him disappear behind the door. He had only seen the man briefly in the invasion, but he was deeply different. Perhaps the metal contraption in his chest had changed him? Perhaps all mortals were this volatile? Though, the others seemed the same. More or less.

Interesting, that one.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Summary

Tony receives an unexpected guest at the tower and finds that his misery loves company.

“Where are you going?” Clint asked, turning his head to follow Steve’s path through the common room. Steve bent down and picked up a leather messenger bag, swinging it over his shoulder.

He was dressed in a uniform. *His uniform.* His pressed and starched olive-brown military uniform from the war that Tony had never seen him in. Well once, maybe. In a photograph. Light from the window caught on the pins across the uniform, glinting and winking at him as Steve adjusted his tie. “I’m going to speak at a school,” he said.

Tony sat up from his lazy curl on the couch, leaning in to get a little closer. In that uniform, Steve reminded him of someone.

“I’m assuming it’s not the usual Avengers tap and dance,” Clint said. Steve shook his head, smiling wryly.

“No,” he said. He adjusted the strap on his shoulder, grinning a little uncomfortably. “There’ll be other veterans there but I’ll look a little...out of place. I suppose.”

“Where’s it at?” Clint asked.

“A highschool.”

“Oh man,” Clint said. “You couldn’t pay me enough to stick me in a room full of kids to lecture.” Steve shook his head, dismissing him.

“I’m looking forward to it,” he said. “Anyway. I have to get going.”

“Wait,” Clint said. “Can you do the salute thing? Just for fun.” Steve rolled his eyes, grinning tolerantly. “Please?” Clint said. “I’ll clean out the fridge,” he offered.

Steve spun around, saluting with a mischievous smirk on his mouth. “Mop the floor too before I get back,” he said.

“Yes sir,” Clint said, smirking right back at him. Steve left the room with a grin still dancing on his lips. He rolled his eyes as he stepped into the elevator, amused with Clint. That had taken some of the edge off of his nervousness about the school lecture.

Clint went back to playing on his laptop, not noticing Tony staring at the elevator doors. Tony was thinking hard about something, and unaware of his dazed look. Clint’s quiet laugh broke his concentration a minute later. Tony turned back. Clint was just watching something on his screen, oblivious to Tony.

Tony stayed in the common room, tweaking a program on his tablet. Once Steve had left, Clint was the only one left in the tower. Natasha had left three nights ago on a field mission without a

backwards glance. She got antsy when she was in the tower for too long.

Bruce was at a conference, and would be for another few days. Rhodey was swamped with work, and Tony hadn't been able to talk to him for more than ten minutes the past week.

It felt empty without them.

A while later Clint sighed, snapping his laptop shut. He set it on the couch and stood, stretching his arms. "Better get the kitchen taken care of," he said. Tony watched him walk across the room and disappear behind the elevator doors. He sighed, tossing the tablet onto the couch beside him.

He didn't have it in him to go out.

He laid back, staring out the long windows at the clear blue sky.

There was the dull hum of various electronics scattered throughout the room, but other than that, there was nothing to keep Tony company. Gradually the sun crept in against Tony's face, keeping him from sleep.

"Sir," Jarvis said, sometime later. Tony stretched. He could've been lying there fifteen minutes or three hours, he'd had no sense of time. "Sir, Jane Foster is here to see you. Shall I allow her in?"

Tony sat up, rubbing his hands against his cheeks to wake himself. "Yeah, I guess," he said. He'd thought sending her those files would've kept her busy, for a week at least. For a fleeting second he worried that she'd discovered something troubling in them that he hadn't noticed.

Tony leaned his head down against the back of the couch and waited for her to come in.

"Hey there," Jane's bright voice said five minutes later. She walked into the room wearing a thin flannel shirt over a cotton t-shirt and jeans. There was a laptop tucked under her arm. She smiled, and from the way her lips stiffly peeled back from her teeth, Tony could tell she'd had just as much sleep as he had.

"Take your pick," Tony said, gesturing to the cluster of couches and armchairs. Jane sat down across from him, holding her laptop close to her. "What's your poison?" He nodded towards the minibar.

"It's two thirty," Jane said. She opened her laptop. "Not that it matters." The keys rattled beneath her pecking fingers. "You know what? What do you have? Do you have scotch? That would be great." Tony openly assessed her as her eyes darted across something on her screen. His skepticism gave way to impressed acceptance.

"Where's the intern?" He asked as he wandered over to the minibar. Jane's lips twitched.

"I gave her the day off," she said.

"I'm sure she was thrilled."

"She knows something's up. She'll pester me about it until I cave and share. I've gotten two texts already."

"Sweet kid."

"Yeah," Jane said. Tony set a drink down on the table in front of her. She rapidly clicked at something.

“So, what’s new?” Tony asked, leaning back into the couch. He envied Jane’s ability to get lost in her work. It was a talent that had been escaping him lately.

“Well,” Jane said, pushing a wavy lock of brown hair behind her ear, “nothing.”

“Nothing?” Tony said.

“I mean there are lots of things I’d like to talk to you about in these files,” Jane said, taking a heavy swig from her glass, “but really I wanted to talk to you about something else.” The glass clunked against the wood as she set it down. There was a wet ring of condensation around it already.

Tony’s attention drifted anxiously to the room around them. Jane kept her eyes glued on the screen in front of her, nervously avoiding Tony. She took another drink. “Well,” she said a little softly. “I was wondering if you’d heard anything...about me...from Loki.”

“What?” Tony said, too quickly, too bluntly to hide his surprise.

Jane’s fingers drifted back from the keyboard. She twisted one hand in the other, biting on her bottom lip. “I don’t know how much Thor told you,” she said. “About...any of it, actually.” She glanced up at Tony, smiling uncomfortably. “I don’t know what you guys talk about.”

Jane sighed loudly, closing her eyes painfully as she sat back into the couch. Her laptop slid off her. She looked down, adjusting it so that it was sitting upright on the couch. “Thor and Loki were protecting me when I had the Aether in me. I...Loki died, protecting Thor ...and me.” Jane brushed her hands back through her hair, sighing again. “If I hadn’t had the aether, Thor’s mother wouldn’t have died, Loki wouldn’t have died...”

She glanced up hopefully at Tony. “Is any of this ringing a bell?”

Tony dropped his head down, studying the glass in his hands. “I read about you and the Aether in the SHIELD files, but I didn’t know about the rest.” Tony set his drink down on the table. “Honestly, Thor hasn’t been around here much, and when he is he doesn’t talk about himself.”

Jane slouched forward, drawing her arms in close to herself. “I wouldn’t expect him to,” she said heavily. Her eyebrows knitted together. “Even if I hadn’t had the Aether...I’d still hold some blame. Frigga died concealing me.”

“I’m an astrophysicist I can’t wield a sword—” Jane stopped herself in a way that implied that it was something she did routinely.

Tony didn’t know whether to reassure her otherwise or not. He didn’t know anything about what had happened outside of Earth.

“But now that Loki’s alive...” Jane looked away. “Has he said anything?”

“No,” Tony said honestly. “Were you expecting something?”

“I wondered if he blames me.”

Her words stayed in the air, hanging heavily.

Loki had been the most forthcoming with Jane. It occurred to Tony that Jane might have a point. Not knowing all of the details made it a difficult call to make for Tony, but he decided that her fears might have some weight to them. Spite may have been Loki’s motivator.



"I'm sorry," Jane said. "I didn't mean to dump this on you." She smiled uncomfortably, forcing cheeriness. "I just wanted to find out about Loki," she said quietly.

Tony grinned just as stiffly, forcing up a pallid version of his signature spark. "Eh, don't worry about the guy. I'm sure he's happily plotting our demise as we speak."

Jane stared down at the floor.

Tony felt sorry for her. He didn't know what she needed, but it was clear to him that she was alone in it. "Here," he said, taking her glass from her. Tony refilled it to the brim. He set the glass gently down into her small hands.

"I'm really sorry," Jane said, smiling uncomfortably again.

"Don't be," Tony said. "I'm glad you're here anyway," he said, thinking of the empty floors around them. As helpless as he felt in aiding Jane, and as sudden as her appearance was, he preferred it to being alone.

"Is he doing better?" Jane asked.

"Yeah," Tony said indifferently, shrugging. "I think." Loki was speaking in full sentences, so that was something, right? "I had one of my assistants gather a bunch of books and clothes for me that I sent down to him, so I guess that worked out. I haven't heard otherwise."

"I bet he liked that," Jane said.

"Sure," Tony said. He didn't tell Jane that the thought of holding someone captive in the building made him feel horrendously guilty and hypocritical. Throwing money and things at Loki made him feel better about it at the times he remembered.

"Thor said that Frigga sent him books too," Jane said softly.

"Fri-? Oh. Right," Tony said, embarrassed by the blunder. He knew about Thor's family, even if he didn't *know* them. Thinking about it, he realized that he hadn't really heard anything at all about Loki from Thor. The god had always been a little embarrassed about the circumstances he met the Avengers under. '*He's adopted*,' rang in Tony's head. "What has Thor said about Loki?"

"Well," Jane said, thinking.

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Loki dropped a book on the floor. Its thud echoed up into the steel ceiling as Loki leaned forward on his barstool. He'd intentionally dropped the book, this time.

It was a terrible book. A boring, terrible, thoughtless book. Most of the books had been disappointing, during the times that he was lucid enough to read them. It was difficult. He had trouble keeping his eyes focused, and other memories would come blaring in to incapacitate him from time to time.

He was getting better, but he knew there were holes that couldn't be fixed. It scared him.

His skin pressed against the chill countertop as he leaned his head down. The books were a disappointment. He didn't know what he'd been expecting from the books. Insight into the Man of

Iron's mind?

But these books weren't personal. They all trumpeted accolades and best seller lists, but they weren't from someone's library. These books were all new, published within the last year, and the Man of Iron hadn't really seemed like he'd been reading avidly in the past year.

Tony hadn't put any thought into selecting them, and Loki realized, he probably hadn't selected them at all. They'd been delivered along with the clothes and his evening meal by Bruce.

Oh, and the clothes. Loki liked the clothes a good deal more. They were expensive. He knew that, even if he knew nothing else about them. Mostly they looked like variations on what he'd worn in Stuttgart, with some more casual pieces mixed in.

He had noticed that they didn't look like what the Man of Iron or Captain America or the Hulk wore, but he had not thought anything of it.

He sat up. The hardback was on its side. He debated. It was that, or the ceiling. He got down to retrieve it, sighing heavily. At least Frigga made an effort to accommodate his taste. She'd known what he'd liked. He sat on the floor then, abandoning the book. Perhaps this served him right, for failing her.

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"Okay, okay," Tony said, laughing a little. His face had flushed bright red from the third drink in his hands. Getting drunk hadn't been the plan, but misery loved company and all that. He didn't care. "I've thought about it but I haven't done it. Yet. Hmm," Tony said, laughing. "Weird that there's something I haven't done."

"I still think you're lying," Jane said, laughing. She'd stopped apologizing and relaxed as she drank, throwing questions at Tony. Mid-laugh the smile fell from her face. "I messed up," she said.

"You and me both," Tony said.

"No. I really, really messed up," Jane said. Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. Then she took another drink, trying to soothe herself. With desperation, she turned to Tony. "I'm death."

"What?" Tony said, laughing nervously. Maybe she was a little more drunk than him.

Fat tears fell down Jane's cheeks. She wiped them away with her flannel sleeves once or twice before giving up on the flood. Tony was too dizzy to run, as he wanted to. Crying Jane was not something he was prepared to handle. Crying anyone, for that matter. "Thor blames me for his mom's death, and his brother's death, of course he doesn't want to see me!" A sob broke from her. Tony shrank back into the couch, grabbing for his drink. "So why'd he dump Loki here? Maybe he's furious with Loki too! Maybe Earth is just his dumping ground for things he doesn't want!"

"No," Tony said, shakily. "Nah."

"Yeah," Jane said, mocking his tone and hiccuping between a sob. "He's not coming back, Tony. He doesn't want to see me or Loki and he's not coming back."

"He'd better come back," Tony said, reminding Jane of Darcy.

"He's not," she said, dropping her head back against the couch. She shut her eyes.

“Everyone’s leaving,” Tony said. He sat forward, his voice climbing. “They can’t just leave us whenever they feel like it.”

“They?” Jane asked distantly.

“You know what, Jane? You know what?” Jane didn’t answer. “You know what?”

“What?”

“You’re better off without him. Before you know it he’ll be telling you about unrealistic expectations and needing space and he’ll tell you the new hairstyle is just because and why are you asking about it and then he’ll start looking at you differently and you’ll notice from the corner of your eye and then you’ll come home one day and——”

“Tony?”

Clint was standing in the elevator. “Are you guys alright?”

Tony opened his mouth to say something sarcastic but Jane was faster. “We’re good,” she said.

Clint frowned disagreeably, hesitating in the elevator. He felt like he was interrupting, but he’d also seen Tony like that before. He didn’t like it. “I’m going to be upstairs if you need something,” he said. “Tell Jarvis.”

“Okay,” Jane said. She turned back to look at Tony when Clint had left. “Loki was,” she said.

“Was what?” Tony asked.

“There,” Jane said. Tony had no idea what she was talking about.

He decided to ask a question instead. “Loki’s not dead, so how can Thor be mad at you for that?”

“He is. Was,” Jane said. “He never said it, but he didn’t have to. He cared when Loki died, you know? I... I can’t imagine what he went through finding him alive again.” She curled up onto the couch, pushing the laptop out of the way with her foot so that she could lie down. “Again.”

“Well. Payback’s a bitch,” Tony said.

Jane nearly dropped the glass in her hand. She quickly drank the rest of it, sliding the empty container onto the table. “I mean, he said it wasn’t my fault but I never really believed him.” She tugged her collar against her neck, cozying into the couch.

“Odin wanted me back on my own realm. Maybe he was right. Maybe we weren’t meant to be together.” She smiled miserably.

“Even if you did think you were meant to be together, it might not have worked out,” Tony said. “We’re better off alone,” he said. He picked up his glass to toast, his wrist swerving in the motion. Jane stayed lying down.

“It’s not over yet,” she said quietly.

Tony downed the rest of his glass. He barely held back from telling her that yes, yes it was over. Fuck, was it over.

She was too sweet and too kind to end up like him. He felt a crippling surge of pity for her. “Jane,” he said. She was starting to fall asleep.

“What,” she said groggily.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t?”

“Don’t do it.”

“What?”

“Tell me you won’t.”

“Tony, you’re not making any sense.” She rubbed at her eye and then stared at him. He stood up from the couch, wavering.

“Come on,” he said. He reached down and grabbed her hand, gently tugging her away from the couch.

“Come on what?” She said, sitting up. He let go of her hand.

“Let’s go ask,” Tony said. The rational part of his brain not caught up in the haze screamed bad idea like bloody murder. He shoved it down. “Let’s go ask Loki what happened with Thor. He’ll tell you. He will.”

“Then you can put it all behind you and stop thinking about it,” Tony said.

Jane stood up from the couch, catching herself against Tony. The rational part of her brain was shrilly insisting to her that this was a terrible idea. They were in no state to barge in on the god of chaos, let alone get helpful information from him. “Okay,” she said.

Dread drifted after them as they stumbled into the elevator. They both knew that it was a terrible decision, but following the impulse was better. Let misery win. Jane wanted the blame. Tony wanted Jane to escape from the end that he knew was coming. If it had come for him, it would come for her.

They were stupid decisions, and they were going to be made.

Loki heard a laugh on the other side of the security door. He turned, glaring at the door. Something smacked into it. He sat up from the bed, waiting.

He slid his legs over the side of the bed, standing. Slowly, cautiously, he stalked towards the door. Loki pressed his ear to the door and waited.

He heard Tony’s voice on the other side.

## Chapter 7

Loki pressed his ear hard against the steel door, incapable of distinguishing individual words. He knew the Man of Iron's voice was on the other side. His keen eyes drifted up and to the side as he leaned into the door, bent on hearing more.

There was a second voice.

Jane Foster. Better. Useful.

He took a few steps back from the door, expecting it to open immediately. Quickly, he paced over to one of the barstools and sat. He wanted to appear imperial when they walked in.

Without his ear pressed to the door he could hear nothing of the other side, and the loud laugh that had alerted him had not occurred again. What in the devil was taking them so horrifically long to enter?

Fifteen minutes later Loki gave up, snatching the book off the floor and irritably returning to its pages.

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"Did you think *any* of that through?" Clint said, his voice rife with annoyance. "That could've ended in a bad way."

"There wasn't really any *thinking* involved," Tony said, returning Clint's annoyance just as strongly. "Besides, all I remember is Steve tucking me into bed. I don't know why he feels like he has to be a mother hen all the time."

"He only does it with you," Clint said. There was something knowing and parental in his voice that made Tony uncomfortable. "And Steve only came back at the very end of the ordeal. I had Jane on a guest floor and you headed towards your room when Steve got home. I didn't tell Steve that I found you trying to get into Loki's. You're welcome."

"Okay, okay," Tony said. "I'm sorry. It was just a little fun." He leaned forward in his chair, folding his hands together. "Where's Jane now?"

Clint sneered, stirring the cup of coffee in his hands. He leaned back against the kitchen counter as he pointedly assessed Tony. "You'd be feeling like shit right now if something had happened to you or Jane, Tony. If I hadn't come down when I had, you two would've just walked in there. He might be hurting right now but he's still capable of pulling something on you," Clint said, frustration crackling across his words. "Especially when you're drunk."

Tony shrugged. "Fine, it wasn't one of my better ideas." Clint flicked his spoon into the sink. It smacked into the side with a loud clang. He lingered for a moment, thinking better of saying something else, before leaving the room on heavy footsteps.

"Jarvis," Tony said. "Where's Jane?"

"I believe that Jane Foster has gone home, sir." Jarvis sounded just a tad bit apologetic. Tony leaned down onto the table, resting his head between his arms.

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Jane had woken up with a headache, squinting in the morning light. Immediately she felt embarrassed. Sluggishly, she wandered towards the bathroom.

Halfway through brushing her teeth a thought occurred to her. She stopped brushing, staring at herself in the mirror.

Maybe it had been a bad idea, but in the light of morning she still wanted to make it. Tony was right. It would help her to know. She needed something other than the murky purgatory she was in.

She dropped the brush into the sink, combing back her frizzy hair with her fingers. The shirt she wore was nothing but wrinkles. Still, she thought as she smoothed down the collar, if she didn't hurry she might not have the nerve another time. Or worse yet, someone might stop her.

It was a slow, quiet walk to Loki's floor. The elevator hummed around her as it descended, chiming mechanically at each floor. There was no resistance from the security system as she requested entry. Vaguely she thought that Tony had authorized her the night before.

As the steel door pulled back, Loki saw Jane standing in a single slat of light from the slim window.

Loki shrugged, turning an open palm towards the barstool beside him. Jane took it cautiously, brushing her hair back behind her ear as she sat down.

Loki looked more familiar to Jane now, with that old sharp presence in his eyes, waiting to calculate his next move. It was reassuring, in a way. She took in a shallow breath, forcing a smile. "You seem better," she said.

"Minutely," he said.

Jane frowned, kneading her hands together in her lap. "I'm sorry," she said softly. She could feel him watching her, but she could not bring herself to look up at him. "For this, and for that."

"You'll have to be more specific," Loki said.

Jane answered slowly, shoving the words out. "The Aether and Frigga and—" She sighed. The surprise on Loki's face quickly morphed into recognition.

"Apologizing will not undo what has been done," Loki said.

"I don't mean that it will—" Jane said, never having intended to imply that it could.

"What is happening now," Loki said. "What will happen." Jane sat up to see that he was watching her closely, his eyes narrowed as he evaluated something in her. "Your sentiments have no influence on Thor's return here."

Jane opened and closed her lips quickly, afraid of making the wrong move. If Loki knew that, then he did know what was going on. She had doubted that he did. "Then he will return if...?"

"You overestimate your significance," Loki said, incapable of erasing all of the malice and scorn from his voice. "The Avengers overestimate their significance."

He looked away from Jane.

“I could waste a hundred of their lifetimes in this room and still walk out over their corpses.” He leaned into his hand as he propped his elbow up against the barstool, pressing his finger against his lip. “I may have lost my last battle on Earth, but it was just a battle.” His gaze tore from its distant, pensive fixation on the sink. “This is a war,” he said to Jane. “One born before your time, and one that will rage on long after you.”

She said nothing, and he could not discern how much she comprehended.

“This is all just one night in a thousand,” he explained, gesturing to the room. “Insignificant in comparison.”

“But you Jane Foster, you do not have the same legacy.” He frowned, and at the back of his eyes, Jane could see a gut-wrenching pity that made her cheeks flush. “You have no place in this war, nor at Thor’s side. The Aether was the closest you got to mattering in this, and it nearly killed you.” He blinked once, waiting for Jane to challenge him.

She could not decipher whether he was saying it earnestly or from spite. When she did not answer him, he decided to challenge her instead. “What makes you think yourself important to Thor?” He turned his head to the side, feigning confusion. “There are dozens waiting in the wings to take your place. There is Sif, waiting to take your place.”

“She will always be waiting,” Loki said. “Why waste what little time you have on Thor? You’re mortal. You’re dying. Surely you would be happier with a dying being such as yourself?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” Jane said self-righteously.

“Understand what?” Loki asked. “That you got mixed up in something far greater than yourself? Or that you just happened to hit a god with your car and think that coincidence makes you destined for each other? Only a child would believe that a god would just fall from the sky and fall in love with them, Jane.” He flexed his shoulders, blinking slowly. “No, I understand far better than you. You are just a fun, amusing little toy for Thor to play with, and then you’ll break. Or he’ll grow bored of you. And you will die and he will move on,” he said. “You are the one that does not understand.”

“As if you understand everything about Thor’s intentions,” Jane said.

Loki grinned maliciously, condescension rippling through his tone. He leaned in closer to Jane. “I understand him far better than you ever will.”

“Stay out of the way in regards to my so-called family and Asgard.” Loki said, standing up from the barstool.

“I may be mortal, but this is still my time to use as I want,” Jane said, her eyes locked in thought as she found the words. “And I’m not ready to give up on Thor yet.” Loki watched as her chest rose and fell in one tight breath. “I don’t know anything about what’s going on with him yet, and I don’t want to walk out on him. I get to make that choice.”

“If that means that you view me as threatening your family,” Jane said, looking resolutely up at him, “then that is not my intention. But I can’t just walk away from Thor. I love him.”

Loki’s back was turned to her. She could not see the torrent of emotion that sent cycling through Loki. “You are not a threat,” he said coldly. “You are meddlesome at best.”

Jane bit down on her lip. She had a lot of mixed up emotions regarding Loki. There was the fact that he was Thor’s brother, and was always going to be significant to Thor regardless of what happened between them. Then there was the resentment she felt towards Loki for New York. And

Coulson. There was Frigga's hope for him, a task that she felt now fell to her in some way. But she wouldn't sit there and let him talk down to her. "Loki," she began, a note of warning in her voice.

"Go make something more of your time, Jane Foster," Loki said resolutely, leaving no room for argument. "Stop chasing after my so-called brother like the mewling kitten you are." When he turned back towards her, threatening and feral, fear flooded her veins. This was the side of Loki that was not to be reckoned with.

Bitterly, she stood up. This conversation would be finished another time. He said nothing towards her as she walked to the door, and the closer she got to it, the more resentful she became towards him. When her hand touched the door knob a wave of spite rushed through her. "I hope you never fall in love with a mortal," she said, shutting the door behind her.

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Steve found Tony standing in the elevator, caught in the cross hairs of his own indecision. Half of Tony wanted to curl up in his bed and sleep off the day, and the other half wanted to go out and party off the latest discomfort. He'd been frozen there for a while, staring listlessly at the rows of floor buttons.

"I'm only going to say this once," Steve said without any greeting. "Your mind needs something to do, Tony. You're too brilliant to be lying around here." He was keeping his eyes set on the doors, avoiding Tony. "Find something. Or help us out. Your mind needs something, and so does Loki's."

"I'll send him a crossword puzzle," Tony said glibly.

Steve only made a sound at the back of his throat. The elevator came to a stop. "There's nothing to lose," Steve said, stepping out. As the doors closed behind him, Steve let the worry come flooding in. He hated seeing Howard's son suffering like this.

- - -

Tony sighed, leaning back against the wall. Fine, maybe Steve was right. Or maybe Steve was just Steve. He stared blankly up at the elevator light, weighing his options again.

Tony desperately wished that he still felt like he could call himself the mechanic. He longed for it to still fit him.

He recalled his last night on the town, forgetting the bit involving the toothbrush. Maybe he could pretend he was a mechanic too, and maybe it would hold up for a few hours.

It was the best option he had.

- - -

Tony spent five minutes in the lab before ditching that plan. He couldn't fix anything in the lab, let alone concentrate on it. Surrendering, he reconsidered Steve's advice.

- - -



“Okay,” Tony said a couple minutes later. Loki was sitting on the barstool where Jane had been, watching him apathetically. “Why don’t you humor me?” He sat down on the foot of the bed, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Loki had not said a word since he’d stepped foot inside the room.

“I mean, if it’s all the same to you and you’re growing bored of Avengers Day Care, I thought we might talk.” Loki’s lips twitched, and Tony could see his eyes veer off to the side for a moment before snapping back to him.

“Why’d Thor choose here anyway?” Tony asked. He sounded carefree, but there was a sharp intellect pulling the strings. “Our going rate’s pretty high, and we don’t even have juice boxes.” He grinned, expecting Loki to show at least a faint hint of amusement. Instead, there was nothing.

“So why here?” Tony asked. “Should I start guessing?”

Loki flicked one of his fingernails against the other, producing a familiar clicking sound.

“Twenty questions then,” said Tony.

## Chapter 8

### Chapter Summary

Struggling to move forward, Tony and Loki instead find themselves reliving their pasts with one another.

“Tell me how it felt to murder your own father,” Sif spat, pressing a blade against his exposed throat.

She had him pinned down against the cold stone floor of the throne room, flanked on the sides by Hogun, Fandral, and Volstagg. Members of the guard that had turned on him remained in the room, seamlessly integrated into the coup d’etat by the foursome.

A bright, crimson drop of blood trickled up onto the silver blade, sliding smoothly down its sharp side in a red trail as he pushed out a cold laugh. “I wouldn’t know.”

A hard set of footsteps entered the room, echoing along the chamber. Loki could only watch the faces around him as they turned to see. Sif shifted anxiously for just a heartbeat. That alone told him who it was.

Loki glared spitefully up at the ceiling. He could see only the long trail of black embers seared into the gold drapery above by Gungnir. He knew the rest of the room was unrecognizable, knew that it was doing him no favors as Thor entered, witnessing the wreckage.

“What have you done?”

The words echoed in the chamber, firm and authoritative. A faint, derisive laugh from his throat brought up three more drops of blood. They dripped quickly along the blade, rushing to join the small pool now forming on his chest. “Loki,” Thor said.

Loki knew the words that would come next. This was the same script they’d been going from their entire lives.

Sif had not released pressure from the blade, and he could speak no further. Loki yearned to see Thor’s face. He wanted to remember that look. He wanted to remember Thor’s agony at having been tricked yet again.

“We have not found the All-father,” Fandral informed him.

They waited quietly, nervously for Thor’s reply. Though Loki could not see Thor, he could see Sif and Fandral’s pinched faces.

Thor gazed down coldly at Loki. He had spent the last few months agonizing over where their father was, and if he was alive at all. He could hardly find it in himself to have sympathy for Loki now. Had he not given enough? Had he not given Loki every second chance in the universe? And what had Loki done with that forgiveness? Murdered their father for his own selfish ends?

There was a limit to his mercy, after all.

Loki heard the footsteps come closer. He could see nothing past Sif's turned face, her sharp cheekbones illuminated like blades in the broken light. As the knife cut ever so slightly into his throat, dread swallowed him whole.

- - -

Loki came back from the memory. The Man of Iron was still there, his eyes widened with...fear? Concern? Loki sighed derisively, turning away.

"So..." Tony said, smiling uncomfortably. Though Loki had been paying him no mind to begin with, Tony had recognized the shift. The god's hands had fallen into his lap, limp and lifeless. Tony had stared at him, mentally willing him to start clicking his nails again, or sigh dramatically, or roll his eyes...anything but the spaced-out stare he had.

It was a relief when Loki came to again, but it was not enough. Tony had seen himself in the god, trapped in three month's captivity in a cave, questions shouted before water began suffocating him...

Loki's gaze drifted over to the thin layer of perspiration on Tony's skin. The man was breathing perceptibly faster. He was scared, Loki decided. It was an odd reaction given the circumstances, but not one that Loki was unaccustomed to in his presence.

Tony's neck was stiff. He couldn't will himself to look back at the door and leave. He needed to get out, to have someone assure him that yes, this was Loki. This was killed-hundreds-of-people-and-sent-me-into-a-hole-in-space-that-I'm-still-having-nightmares-from-Loki, and it was okay to hold him there. It was completely different. It was *rational*.

"Bring me a meal," Loki said.

Loki watched as Tony stumbled for a moment, then rose calmly, and walked to the door. "Uh," Tony said, pausing. "What do you want?"

"Surprise me."

Tony vanished behind the door a moment later.

Loki leaned his back against the counter, staring blankly up at the ceiling. Strange, that Man of Iron. He had entered the room so buoyantly. Loki wondered what had triggered the sudden change.

Tony returned a few minutes later, carrying a greasy paper bag and an assortment of brightly colored bottles. As he dropped the armful onto the counter the bottles went rolling onto the floor. Tony looked up at him, smiling roguishly at the blunder, his fear from earlier evidently gone.

"I still expect a good tip," Tony said.

He took cold leftovers from the bag, sliding something wrapped in paper towards Loki. The smell was horrendous. Loki looked the other way, ignoring the man as he pushed a carton filled with salty, fried wedges towards him. Was this actually edible?

At least he recognized some of the bottles on the floor. Bruce brought those occasionally. He wondered when the green beast would be coming as Tony picked bottles up from the floor.

"—best burgers in the city," Tony was saying. He brightened when Loki turned to look at him.

“Rhodey and I go there all the time.”

Loki could recognize when someone was trying to please him, and it never did that person any favors. Not that he didn't like being pandered to, but he found the groveling obnoxious. It reminded him of servants in court, or the peasants that thought they could change their fate by ingratiating themselves to royalty. “They have a great happy hour too,” Tony said. Why exactly was the Man of Iron trying to appease him? It seemed at odds with the stubborn, prideful mortal he was before.

Loki primly unwrapped the burger and slid it over in front of Tony. He cracked the plastic lid on one of the bottles like a neck and sipped it slowly, watching the expression on Tony's face change several times as he stared down at the rejected burger.

Loki let out a loud sigh when he'd finished drinking. He turned his eyes to the side, studying Tony as he kept the bottle held to his lips. No, this man had certainly changed.

“Will you tell me?” Loki asked.

The surprise jolted Tony from decoding the implications of the rejected meal. “Tell you what?” He asked, looking up from the sad hunk of meat.

Loki twisted around to set the bottle on the counter behind him. “You are so intent upon asking me questions,” he said. “Perhaps you should share a little of yourself?”

“Right,” Tony said skeptically.

“You may begin now,” Loki said, staring up at the ceiling. He folded his fingers together in his lap, waiting.

Tony marveled at how Loki could flip between ferocity and sympathy so quickly. He knew it was a lie, and yet, he didn't mind. Tony wasn't above putting on shows of his own. He quieted, thinking. “Well right now,” Tony said, “I'm tired.” He grinned. “I've got one hell of a hangover.”

Loki's expression did not change, nor did his fixation on the ceiling. “And I'm wondering what to do with the Norse god in my basement.”

Tony ran his fingers through his hair, ruffling the ends back and forth. He looked haggard, and every bit as tired as he admitted to, if not more. He spotted the books that had been crammed under the bed.

Standing, Tony walked over. Comfortably, quietly, he leaned down and fished a book out before sitting back up on the mattress.

The pages spun through his fingers as he perused the lines rapidly, apparently bored. He did not see Loki's interest turn to him.

“Troy picked this one out,” Tony said, tossing it onto the bed. He leaned down and grabbed another, doing the same. “I told him to get a variety,” he said. Tony skimmed several books more before looking up at Loki. “What'd you think?” He asked, sounding doubtful.

Loki shrugged. “I hadn't high expectations.”

Tony frowned, feeling inexplicably guilty. He shoved the emotion down. He had done what had been asked, there was no reason for him to feel bad for the let down that the books were. It was not his assistant's fault that their tastes were different. “I'll give Troy a better reading list next time,” he promised. “Actually,” he said. “Jarvis, give Loki access to book retailers online and order what

he wants.”

As Jarvis buzzed off an affirmative Tony set the book in his hands down on the bed. “Don’t go ordering bomb instruction manuals now,” Tony said, smirking. “I don’t want to pay twice for them.”

“Wherever would I find the materials to assemble such a thing,” Loki drawled, staring out the window. Still, there was a faint smirk on his lips. Tony caught it.

“You’d be surprised,” Tony said. “Not that I’m helping you.”

“Of course not,” Loki said.

Feeling a little better, Tony stood up from the bed.

“You’re different,” Loki said. Tony’s lifted mood dropped out right from under his feet. He didn’t have to explain why he was—“the others do not visit in the same way you do. Rogers, perhaps,” Loki said, glaring suspiciously, “but none offer me things the way you do. Why?”

Tony let go of the breath he’d been holding in. Loki wasn’t talking about that kind of different. Tony always just assumed that he was. Tony sat back down on the bed. “Hospitality and all that,” he said glibly. “Maybe I just want to show off. Not that I need to,” he said, grinning devilishly.

Loki hummed to himself, considering that. “No,” he said.

“Oh? I need to show off?” Tony asked hopefully.

“Could it be that you want something?” Loki asked, ignoring Tony’s jest. Tony was taken back a little.

Not that he blamed Loki for being suspicious, but all the same. “No,” Tony said, raw and genuine. “I don’t want anything from you.”

“If it seems that way…” He looked out across the room, wondering how he was coming across to the Norse god. Would he tell him that Steve had practically begged him to make an effort? No. “If I showed up on Asgard bruised and out of it, with Thor telling you to keep me locked up without further notice, wouldn’t you be the least bit curious?”

Tony turned back to look at him, his soft brown eyes unusually kind. “Wouldn’t you?”

Loki opened his lips to say something, but the Gungnir ceiling invaded his mind again. The scene played further as his body went numb, and unaware, he slipped from the barstool. “Loki?” Tony shouted feebly, hurrying from the bed. He crossed the few feet to the barstool, hesitantly touching the god.

Loki had sloped onto the floor with his back against the counter, thankfully not managing to hit his head. “Aww shit,” Tony whispered. He slipped his arms beneath Loki, dragging him to the bed in a pitiful display. Loki was far too heavy for him to carry, and he was terrified of the god suddenly waking and eviscerating him.

He tugged Loki up onto the bed, knocking the books onto the floor. “Okay,” Tony said, his voice cracking with anxiety. “Okay.”

“I don’t know what to do,” he said, panicking, forgetting about all the help readily available to him. Tony adjusted Loki’s legs on the bed, trying to make him look normal. His heart was beating

too fast. His brain was drawing a blank.

“Sir,” Jarvis said. “His vital signs are fine. He is merely unconscious.”

“Oh,” Tony said, immensely relieved to hear the automated voice. “Tell me what’s happening.”

“His state of being is consistent with the cycles he has been in since arriving. You on the other hand—”

“Yeah, I’ve got it Jarv,” Tony said. “I’ve got it.” He stood back from the bed, his head spinning. He didn’t understand why, but suddenly he had tears in his eyes. He was seeing himself on the cave floor, helpless.

He patted his cheeks, trying to snap himself out of it. This was a completely different situation. Tony sunk down onto the bed, sitting away from Loki, staring blankly at the door.

He was out of the cave. He had been, for a very long time. His life had gotten better. He had put everything back together, hadn’t he? He was a hero, a billionaire, a celebrity. Now things were...at least he wasn’t back in that cave, right? A few more hot tears tumbled down the rough skin on his cheeks.

Tony sat there until he trusted himself to stand, and then rubbed at his face until he was ready to turn around. Loki was still unconscious in the bed, his eyes closed peacefully. He almost looked angelic, like this. It was unsettling.

Tony turned the top half of the comforter over him, knowing that he couldn’t get Loki down into the sheets below. That would have to do for now.

Dismally, he left the room. The further he got from the room, the worse he felt. Was he really leaving Loki alone down there? Was that really okay? Why did he have to feel terrible about leaving the bastard?

Tony clutched at the elevator bar, knowing deep down that it was going to be a long night.

When Loki woke up he was alone, strangely arranged in his bed with half a blanket over him. Pushing the heavy cotton away with his fingers, he wondered how he’d gotten there. He glanced around the room, but the Man of Iron was gone. His discarded lump of food was still there, as was Bruce’s delivery of his evening meal. He glanced out the window at the dark skyline.

Loki laid back in the bed and asked Jarvis to explain the book arrangement.

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Close to midnight, Loki looked up to see Tony entering the room. “Alright,” Tony said, helping himself to a spot on Loki’s bed without a second thought. He sat facing away towards the door in the same place as before.

Loki watched him silently from beneath the covers, his back up against the headboard with the television remote in his hand. Tony’s voice carried right up over the dull sound of the program.

“I know I shouldn’t be doing this,” he said. “Not that it’s stopped me before,” he turned back to Loki, grinning, before looking away again. “But here’s the story.”

Slowly, steadily, Tony told him about the cave in Afghanistan, glossing over the uncomfortable details. He even told him about some of the decisions he’d made afterwards, the hopes that he’d

had, and his decision to become Iron Man. He tried to keep it simple, without elaborating too much. "I figure you'd learn about what happened if you did your homework," Tony said. "But this is me telling you."

Loki watched as Tony's back rose and fell in one large, quiet breath. When Tony had first appeared in the room he had been irritated by the unannounced arrival and invasion of space, but as Tony had spoken that had slipped away. "So if something happened on Asgard...not that I'm getting all touchy feely," Tony said, turning back around for the first time since he'd begun speaking, smiling. By the nine, did he look tired. "I'm just saying you could find worse parties to talk to about it than me."

Tony stared quietly back at Loki's somber face as the god thought that over. He silently turned his head away to absently watch the television. Tony was just beginning to regret his decision when Loki finally spoke. "I had to guarantee my survival," Loki said. He watched as a seagull glided across the television and splashed into the water. "Thor made it clear that he would not hesitate to end my life if I betrayed him again."

He tapped quickly at the television remote, flipping through blip after blip of channels. "I had to keep a card in my hand, then. In doing so," Loki said, deliberately limiting the details, "I guaranteed my survival but was subjected to this," he said, coldly waving a flat hand in the direction of his face.

Tony frowned and then willed his lips back into place, struggling to appear neutral. He did not want Loki thinking that he was pitied. Loki sneered, his gaze still set on the television. "I have already escaped the prisons of Asgard once." Another channel, another channel. "This realm was considered more secure."

It was an insult, and an embarrassment. They had decided to send him to the ones that had defeated him once, in a backwards, uncivilized realm so much less worthy than his own beloved Asgard. He glanced over at Tony, who was watching the door again, his slender features accented by the flickering television.

"How'd you betray him?" Tony asked. His voice sounded normal, and Loki could infer nothing about his question while the man's back was turned.

Loki mulled it over, weighing the consequences before deciding that it would make no difference. If Thor returned, they would find out anyway, and their knowing now would change nothing. "He believes I murdered our father."

Tony felt a sharp prick in his back, a warning note of apprehension. "Did you?"

"I said he believes," Loki said. "Not that he knows."

Tony glanced back at him with a worried line in his brow. He knew he was falling into the middle of something, he just had no idea how far. Thor was his combat partner and his friend, and Jane was rapidly growing on him. She was clever and dedicated, and could match him, if not outwit him in some places during scientific discussions. But Loki was rapidly morphing into a tender weak spot for Tony, and he was just beginning to get a hint of it.

Loki's expression was all confidence and expectation, awaiting Tony's response. If he had frightened the man, it made no difference. "What's going to happen when he comes back for you?" Tony asked.

Loki turned away from him, his face falling into resignation. "One of three possibilities."

“Which are?”

Loki grinned. “I am not about to tell you, Man of Iron.”

“Don’t call me that,” said Tony. “And don’t stick “of” in everything. It’s entirely unnecessary.”

“And how might I address you then,” Loki said, sounding persnickety.

“Tony’s fine,” he said. “Or Mr. Stark, if you want to sound like you work for me,” he said, smirking. “But then I’d expect a little more appreciation when you saw me.”

“Hmm,” Loki said dully, not really caring for either option. “Stark then,” he said, dropping the title. He was not about to address the mortal in any lowly fashion.

“At least that’s better than son of Stark,” Tony said, recalling some of Thor’s word choices. “Daddy issues,” he said, standing up from the bed. “Though not as bad as yours it seems.”

He grinned flippantly, and Loki couldn’t tell whether he was taking a jab at him or being playful. “Anyway,” Tony said. “Nice heart to heart. Don’t expect it all the time.”

“Thank the nine,” Loki said, suddenly feeling rather fond of the mortal although he feigned apathy.

Neither said goodbye as Tony left, but their minds were both already on next time.



## Chapter 9

### Chapter Summary

Tony has second thoughts while Loki takes on a new rival.

In the light of the next day, Tony regretted divulging to Loki. Without the promptings of his fears, and being in a better headspace than the night before, sharing those things seemed too intimate, too fast. He would've been more comfortable stripping naked than recounting Afghanistan with all of the emotional details he'd put in. He thought that he'd glossed over it, but recalling the event, he realized that he'd shared a lot more than he was now comfortable with.

"Is there a word for buyer's remorse but with regretting what you've said?" Tony asked Rhodey the next day, after telling him as much. Rhodey was at the steering wheel, having nominated himself sober driver for the evening.

Rhodey shrugged. "I don't know, man. The closest I can come to that is 'word vomit' and it sounds like you had a bit of that too." He patted Tony on the arm. "Couldn't have been that bad, though."

Tony shot him a withering look of assured skepticism. "You could be helping the guy out," Rhodey suggested. "Isn't that what Steve wanted you to do, anyway? Get through to him?"

"Yeah," Tony said, twisting his mouth uncomfortably. "But I told Bruce my life story once and he fell asleep. Loki listened."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

Tony shook his head. "I don't think so."

"You're thinking too hard about it," Rhodey said. Tony's cell phone buzzed.

It was a text from Jane.

"They're getting a table," Tony said. He set the phone back inside his pocket. Long shadows drifted across the windshield as they passed under rows of city streetlights. "How's the SHIELD consulting going?"

"Can't wait for it to be over," Rhodey said, swinging them into a parking space. He clicked off his seatbelt and took in a breath, bracing himself for the evening ahead.

Tony was already outside on the pavement. He led them to a table in the back of the restaurant, where Jane and Darcy were sitting with fishbowl margaritas.

"Nice to see you again," Tony said to Darcy as he sat down.

"I was offended that you two didn't invite me to your last little shindig," she said, taking a showy sip of her margarita. "That's why drinks will be on you two tonight."

Tony laughed as Jane rushed to amend Darcy's statement, but she fell quiet when she saw that it

was okay. “If you’re going to throw up in my car you walk yourselves back too,” Rhodey said.

“I won’t throw up in your car.” Darcy twisted her fingers behind her back. “I promise,” she said. Rhodey grinned, rolling his eyes as he turned to flag down the waiter.

“So Stark,” Darcy said, tapping the table in front of him. “When do I get to be in the Avengers? I can drive the van.” Tony blinked, tugging his mind back to the table. For a moment he’d looked into Darcy’s face expecting to find unnaturally green eyes.

“We’re pretty exclusive,” Tony recovered. “Have any superpowers?”

“Money’s not a superpower, Tony,” Darcy said.

“No, but supernaturally good looks are,” Tony said. He winked. The waiter set a drink down in front of him. Darcy laughed.

“So I’m in then,” Darcy said. Just as Tony opened his mouth to retort she shushed him. “If you disagree that means that you think I’m hideous and then you’ll have to buy me a car or something.” Tony turned to Jane for backup, but she was in the middle of discussing something with Rhodey. “Can I get a cape? I want to match with Thor,” Darcy said lightheartedly, clapping a hand to her mouth a moment later. A sideways glance at Jane said the mention had gone unnoticed.

“We’ll get you a helmet too,” Tony muttered. He grinned, thinking of the horned one. “On second thought, maybe not.”

“Nope, I am getting a helmet,” Darcy declared.

“For what?” Jane asked, suddenly listening.

“Bicycling,” Darcy said, taking a drink. “Gotta be safe,” she said unconvincingly.

“We’re going to bike in the Tour de France,” Tony said. Rhodey laughed. “Don’t crush my dreams,” Tony admonished him. Rhodey just took a sip of his drink, smirking to himself.

The outing, pleasant as it was, wound down by midnight.

Darcy tried to talk Rhodey into dropping her off at the tower as an honorary Avenger, and when that didn’t work, she tried the “but-Jane-got-to” route until they were all arguing loudly and Rhodey threatened to pull the car over.

“Good,” he said when they’d all piped down. Angling the rearview mirror, he checked to see that they were all in their seats, hands to themselves. Then he took the road towards Darcy’s apartment.

Rhodey dropped her off first, and then Jane a few minutes later, before setting course back towards the tower. Though he’d known better than to say so in front of Darcy, he had a floor on the tower. It had started out as a guest floor, but with Tony’s frequent calls in the past few months he’d wound up staying the night so frequently that the floor belonged to him.

Rhodey was relieved to pull the car back into the tower garage, despite how enjoyable the evening had been. “Stay in your own room tonight,” he prodded Tony when they reached his floor. “I don’t want to have you crying on my shoulder about you and your Norse god problem.”

“No promises,” Tony said. He leaned back as the doors closed, feeling content. Jane and he had linked hands in their separate free falls, and were becoming fast if not unlikely survival buddies. He liked Darcy, too. He’d have to give Jane a hard time about keeping Darcy all to herself.

It was less wild than he was used to, but it had been pleasant. Comfortable. In fact, he thought as he curled into bed, he might not roll over and be startled awake by the absence on the other side of the bed tonight.

- - -

Loki paced the length of the tiny room restlessly. The ceiling voice (Jarvis, as it insisted upon being called, the uppity menace) informed him that according to the shipping tracker, his books had arrived at the tower. That had been three hours ago.

Loki had been awake since three that morning, and the afternoon was nearly over. It had been impossible to sleep. First he had rolled over in the soft sheets, confused by their strange texture. Sleepily, he reasoned that his confusion was only because he was in Thor's room. He must've wandered in after having a nightmare, he thought. Beside him he could see nothing but black. He reached out his hand in the darkness, seeking reassurance with outstretched fingers. When they met only air he remembered where he was, and the thousand years between childhood and now, and rolled over with a bitter ache.

He had drifted back asleep that time, but the second time had woken him for good. He'd jumped up from the bed, hearing the Other's voice in his ear. Dead, he assured himself. Completely, wonderfully, utterly dead. It was only a dream.

He stayed sitting up in bed until dawn crawled in through the window.

- - -

"Sir," Jarvis said, waking Tony from an afternoon nap.

"What," Tony grumbled, pulling the pillow in tight around his ears.

"I thought it pertinent to inform you that Loki is threatening to burn down the building."

"WHAT," Tony barked, bolting upright in the bed.

"I thought it pertine—"

"Nobody likes a smartass, Jarvis." The soft pillow had fallen into his lap. He squeezed his hands down against it. Jarvis sighed passive aggressively.

"The likelihood of him being capable of carrying out the threat is 0.02%," Jarvis said.

"Then why'd you wake me up," Tony complained. He fell back down against the bed.

"He is offering to cease his 'imminent destruction' as he phrases it in exchange for the delivery of the book order which 'rightfully must be bestowed upon him.'"

Tony smiled proudly for a moment, appreciating Jarvis' sudden attempt at imitating the god's voice. "Shall I relay what I believe are meant to be expletives?" Jarvis asked. He sounded a tad bit put out. Maybe Jarvis didn't like the god in their basement.

"Just tell him to keep his panties on," Tony said, getting out of bed. "I'll be down in a minute."

- - -

It took Tony another forty minutes to get downstairs. Two to get dressed, the rest just to find the damn order. It had been piled in with parts orders for the development department, and looking at the large pile of boxes, Tony could understand how that mistake had been made.

He found a cart and loaded them on, but not before writing a personal note on the Stark Industry invoice taped to them. Tony stuck it back on the orders log. Grinning spitefully, he wished that he could be at Pepper's desk when she read it.

Loki was lying in bed, sharpening two dull table knives against themselves when Tony walked in.

Tony wanted to laugh at the sight, but he had managed some bizarre sense of self-preservation today. He must not've been feeling well. Instead, he shoved the boxes into the room with his foot. The wheeling cart had to be left outside in the security lock.

Loki walked towards him in sweeping strides with a knife in either hand. Tony's throat constricted. He didn't have the suit, or the time to get back through the door. Loki stopped in front of him.

With a seething look of disdain he glanced past Tony, bent down, and rammed the knives into the boxes. Their dull blades precisely slit the taped sides, gutting the cardboard like custard.

He picked up a heavy book with a sideward glance at Tony. The man was watching the knife that stuck out sideways from between his fingers as Loki gripped the book. He took a few steps away towards the bar, watching Tony all the while.

"We might have to take away some of your toys," Tony said when he was out of stabbing distance.

Loki sneered and tossed one of the knives at him. It smacked into the door beside Tony's head, clanging against the metal before falling to the floor. "Uncalled for," Tony said like a school teacher, making a face.

Loki rolled his eyes and cracked the fresh spine on the book. It screamed against the quiet of the room.

"Someone's got their panties in a twist," Tony said, resting his palm against the door's handle.

"Your assistant is utterly incompetent," Loki snapped, walking to the counter. He dropped the book. It hit with a giant thud. Loki slid onto a barstool, keeping a watch on Tony in his peripheral vision.

"You ordered these books," Tony said, confused. Loki threw him a contemptuous look.

"Your assistant," he said, spitting out the word, "assured me that these would arrive yesterday. Instead, there was a 'shipping delay,' which I take it, means your assistant failed to prioritize these books on time. Then, when he said that they arrived today, he would not get them himself. In fact, he said that he *could not* get them himself."

Loki took the knife he still held and scraped it against the counter in frustration. Tony watched as his knuckles turned white against the hilt. "I should very much like to find the room he has hidden away in and slit his throat."

"Troy?" Tony asked incredulously.

"Jarvis," Loki said.

The stupid giggle that slipped from Tony's throat blared in Loki's ears. "You think Jarvis is a guy

sitting in a room somewhere, taking your calls?”

Loki blinked once. “Does that amuse you, Stark? That your underlings are so lazy and ineffectual?”

Tony burst into laughter. Giggling, rolling laughter that he had not experienced in months. As tears came to his eyes he stared at Loki, with the knife still held in his hands, pointed into the counter, the perfect picture of murder. Furious with his A.I. “Jarvis isn’t a person,” Tony said in gasp of breath. “He’s a computer.”

Tony wiped the tears away from his face, amazed to still be alive. “I can see how you’d make that mistake I guess,” Tony said charitably. Loki set the knife down on the counter.

“I am pleased you find my captivity so amusing,” he said darkly. The implication was obvious to Tony.

“No,” he said quickly. “Just your knowledge gap with our technology.” He glanced down at the open box beside him, curious. “I’d love to get a look at tech on Asgard though,” he said, reading the book titles. “Jane’s retelling of the med bay is fascinating.”

“It’s beyond your scope of understanding,” Loki said harshly.

Tony looked up at him crassly. “Doubt it.”

“Your kind is incapable of managing time,” Loki said. “I fail to see why you’d manage anything else.”

“This is the last time I get you anything,” Tony said. His palm fell back against the door.

Loki lifted up his head in the heaviest display of chagrin that Tony had ever seen.

Loki licked his lips, furiously failing to placate himself. “That will not be necessary.”

“You don’t really get a choice in it,” Tony said. He crossed his arms against his chest, leaning into the door. Loki would not look at him. “I’m sticking my neck out for you getting this shit. So if you want to be ungrateful, be my guest, but I’m not going to hang around begging for a thank you.”

Loki closed his eyes, sucking a breath in through his flared nostrils. “I’m sure as hell not going to stand here while you take jabs at me, your highness,” Tony carried on. Loki’s fingers clenched into the silky fabric of his trousers.

“Stark,” he gritted out. “My thanks are in order.” The physical stress was building to its breaking point. He felt his head lurch to the side and struggled to catch himself against the counter. Seeing him swoon to the side alleviated some of Tony’s anger, but not all of it. “Perhaps you should leave,” Loki said quietly. He propped his hands against his forehead, slumping against the counter.

Tony glanced down at the opened boxes.

Loki heard the cardboard slide along the floor. There were stiff, quick thumps behind him. A heavy throbbing pounded in his head as he turned to see Tony stacking the books on his beside table.

He did the job swiftly and methodically, lining the books up by size. Tony broke the cardboard down flat with his slender arms. The empty ones were tossed over by the door. When he’d finished the last one he stacked them all up.

His eyes met Loki's once, burning against some internal restraint, before the man disappeared behind the door.

- - -

Loki didn't touch the books. He slid into bed, swamped with homesickness. Occasionally he glanced over at the stack. He would stare at it for a while, but then he would roll back over. He carried on like that until the evening, when Bruce walked in.

Bruce set a tray on the counter after a brief, courteous hello, as he always did. Loki cleared his throat. Bruce paused, halfway to the door. He stayed still for a few seconds before deciding to give Loki his attention.

"Stark left this here," Loki said.

He grabbed the first book in the stack, holding it out towards Bruce.

Bruce glanced down at the book, then up at Loki. "Okay," he said, grabbing it. Bruce waited a few seconds for Loki to say something, then left.

Bruce brought the book up to Tony. "I didn't leave anything down there," Tony said, taking the book. He turned it over in his calloused hands. *A History of Western Civilization*.

"I figured," Bruce said. He left Tony in his room, heading off to bed so that he could work early in the morning.

Tony set the book down on his bedside table. He'd already cooled off about the whole thing. "Jarvis," he said, going back to playing with the tablet in his hand. "Give me a status report on Loki."

"There is nothing new to report," Jarvis said. "His location has not moved from his bed."

Reading, Tony figured. He went back to the tablet. Twenty minutes later, he set the tablet down on his bedside table. Its corner tapped against the book.

Tony stared at the little crease along its spine.

He sighed. He threw his feet over the bed. He grabbed the book.

Loki turned when he heard the doors open. Tony was standing there, the heavy book held in both hands. Stubbornly, he walked over to the bedside. Tony set the book down and picked up the stack a few books down, setting those to the side as well. Then he placed the history book in the middle. His wrist faltered for a split second as he tipped the other stack back on top.

"I'm in that book," he said. "The second to last chapter." Tony kept his sight trained on the nightstand.

Loki's eyes wandered across his bed spread. He heard Tony sigh.

There was a small singe in the wall that Tony hadn't noticed earlier. "What's this?" He asked, his voice suddenly sharp.

"You were trying to set the building on fire," he said.

“No,” Loki said quickly.

Tony pointed at the mark on the wall. “I’ve committed arson enough times in my life to know what that looks like.”

“It’s magic,” Loki said in exhaustion. He flipped his wrist. A sad, fizzing spark fell onto the bed, singeing a hole in the comforter. Tony’s shoulders dropped. “It’s useless,” Loki said.

Tony could not mistake the utter depression ravaging Loki’s face. *Aww hell*, Tony thought. He sat down on the edge of the bed, slumping forward. “Don’t worry about the books,” Tony said. He felt the mattress bounce as Loki shifted minutely behind him. “They’re getting a rise out of Pepper anyway.”

“Who?” Loki asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony said, getting up. “You just plot some murders or whatever it is that little heart of yours desires.”

They were silent.

Jarvis took that to mean it was his cue. “Unless that murder is mine.”

“Yours is not even worthy of plotting,” Loki hissed at the voice.

“If anyone in this room were to commit a murder, I would be the most capable,” Jarvis said coolly. “I have the greatest access to resources.”

“Jarvis,” Tony said. “I raised you better than that.”

“Hardly,” Jarvis said.

“Sorry,” Tony said to Loki. “He gets wild when he doesn’t get enough electricity.” He took a few more steps towards the door.

“I look forward to his demise,” said Loki.

“And I yours,” Jarvis said.

“Excellent,” Loki said.

“Wonderful,” said Jarvis.

Tony smiled a little. Maybe some reprogramming was in order. Or maybe he’d wait and see how long this rivalry could go. “Okay boys,” Tony said. “Lights out.” Jarvis blackened the room.

“Jarv,” Tony said impatiently. Hesitantly, some light returned. Tony opened the security door.

He did not return to his room, but the kitchen, where he looked for something to do. Steve came in, sleepy-eyed and shuffling his feet to get a glass of water. “Isn’t it past your bedtime?” Tony said playfully.

“And yours,” Steve said, taking out a glass. He sipped it slowly, his eyes adjusting to the light as he watched Tony. “Come on,” he said as he set it in the sink. He placed his hand on Tony’s shoulder, nudging him forward a bit.

It surprised him that Tony let him push.

He rode up the elevator with Tony, wondering if something had changed. “Good night, old man,” Tony said as Steve walked through the doors.

“Watch it,” Steve said. The doors shut. He grinned as he fell into bed.



## Chapter 10

### Chapter Summary

Tony attempts to spend more time with the Norse god in his charge, but it is a task easier said than done.

“Here,” Tony said, setting a pink frosted confection on the counter. He smiled comfortably at Loki as the god lounged in bed, reading. Tony noticed that he’d eased away from the formal wear. Today it was a loose fitting beige shirt and dark wash jeans. “It’s from Steve’s birthday. You’ll like it. You seem like someone that’d have a sweet tooth.”

Loki nodded minutely as if to agree, his narrowed eyes deigning Tony worthy of attention. “And how old is he now?” He asked, noticing that it did not seem like Tony intended to stay.

Tony grinned. “He gets kinda touchy about that. It’s like, do you count the years he lost or ignore them?” Tony leaned his arms back against the counter, shifting his weight on his feet hurriedly as he spoke. “Safe to say, it’s sort of a lot.” His head tilted up towards Loki. There was a curious spark in his eyes before he asked, “how old are you?”

“Older than you,” Loki said.

Tony grinned. “Alright,” he said. He began walking to leave.

“Wish Steve a pleasant birthday on my behalf,” Loki said.

“Will do,” Tony said cheerily before disappearing behind the door.

- - -

“If I recall correctly, you were rather proud of how recently contracted this room is,” Loki said over Tony’s shoulder. Tony pushed him back with his gloved arm.

“You’re not helping,” he said. Tony brandished the wrench in his hand towards Loki. “And it doesn’t matter how newly remodeled this room is, you’re welcome by the way, you still clogged the drain.” There was a bucket beneath the kitchen sink, and Tony was getting ready to snake it. “You can’t stuff lemon wedges and whatever the hell else I’m going to find down the sink.”

Loki shrugged, contentedly looming behind Tony. “Perhaps you ought to address the smell first.”

“Oh? Is it too much for your precious little nose?” Tony stuck the snake in the drain pipe. “Why don’t you go back to reading your books and stop double checking what I’m doing?”

“Then who would manage your oversight?” Loki asked innocently.

“Like you have any idea of what you’re checking for,” Tony said. He turned just in time to see Loki sneering at the putrid mass of sewer-line sludge the snake dragged out.

“How barbaric,” the god said.

“You’re the one that caused it,” Tony reminded him. Loki looked away and upwards, sauntering back over to the bed. He picked up a book and pressed it closely to his nose, sucking in the astringent smell of glossed pages and ink as he watched Tony finish the job.

“You’re welcome,” Tony said, walking to the door with his hands full. He smirked at Loki’s prim, perturbed state. Once he’d shoved all of his things on the other side of the security door he stuck his head back in. The bucket with the sludge was still in his hand. He held it up for Loki to see over his book, making a threatening gesture. Loki rolled his eyes, but he could hear Tony chuckle as the door closed.

- - -

“Steve,” Loki said by way of explanation. Tony clicked one of the checkers over the other, ruining the perfectly set board.

“Did you win?” Tony asked, glancing over his shoulder at Loki. Tony had not bothered to shave, and there were heavy circles under his eyes. Loki was lounging in bed, reading something from a shipment that had arrived the day before.

“Of course,” he drawled. The page in his hand turned with a loud flap. “Don’t tell me you want to play.”

“Nah,” Tony said. “Jarv does though.”

“Hardly,” Jarvis said.

“As if that mechanical dolt could offer me any entertainment,” Loki said.

“That is precisely what a person about to lose would say,” Jarvis answered.

“Is it?” Loki asked, setting his book down. He glared ineffectively at the ceiling as though Jarvis was sitting inside it.

“It sounded defensive to me,” Jarvis said. “Shall I beat you in a game or save you the embarrassment?”

Tony moved aside as Loki strode over to the checker board, righting Tony’s misplaced checker in one swift gesture. “It seems I shall have to move the pieces for you, since you are so pitifully incapable of doing so yourself,” Loki said.

“What a nice opportunity for you to cheat,” Jarvis said. “You’ll need to. To win.”

Loki laughed coldly, launching into a villainous monologue against the AI as Tony quietly let himself back through the door. The sound of Loki’s voice faded as the door sealed shut.

When Tony saw that the checkers and the board were on the floor the next day, he wisely said nothing.

- - -

Loki was asleep when Tony walked in, carrying a lunch tray. He set it down on the counter with a soft clink.

Several pages torn from books were lying on the counter. Over the lines of print was an outline in black marker. Tony leaned in closer, studying the design.

There were notes, in English, along the sides. Tony realized that they were extensive, elaborate explanations written in Loki's narrow, looped hand.

He stayed standing there, lost in the study of the design. It wasn't until twenty minutes later that he looked up, realizing that time had passed.

Loki was still asleep, or out of it. Tony could not tell.

Why Loki had decided to articulate the functions of his glow stick of destiny, Tony had no idea. He went upstairs to Bruce, leaving the pages behind.

Bruce took his glasses off, pondering the question for a while before setting his thin wire frames on his coffee table. "Honestly?" He asked.

"Unless you have a great lie you've been dying to use on me," Tony said.

Bruce relaxed into his chair. "He may just be remembering it." He brushed a wavy lock of hair back from his face. "It probably just happened during an episode. I don't think there's much to it, though it's probably interesting for us. If it's correct. It could be all nonsense. How'd he get the marker anyway?" Bruce sounded far more interested in his own question than Tony's.

"Me," Tony said, flexing his mouth uncomfortably. "He asked for something to write with."

"And you gave him a Crayola marker."

"Yeah," Tony said. Bruce stared at him. "What?"

"I'm just wondering why it wasn't an embossed pen or something."

"I have markers," Tony said defensively. "For designing and shit."

"I think you have a coloring book," Bruce said, grinning.

"Alright we're done here," Tony said, smirking as he left.

- - -

"What's this?" Tony asked, feigning confusion the next day when Loki set the papers in his hands. Loki's stare was cold, and Tony found it difficult to understand.

"Proof that your Midgardian technology is antiquated beside ours."

"Oh," Tony said, pushing out a breath as he turned through the pages. "Maybe this is a thank you for fixing the sink?" He risked. He kept his attention glued to the messy pages, his ears pricked for an answer. Loki scoffed.

"For doing your job?"

“Not my job,” Tony said, glancing up. He grinned. “Or maybe it’s because you’re still feeling defensive over the scepter? Wanna make it clear that it was a technological failure and not your fault? Look, if you’re still embarrassed over it, I’m sure I could get a doctor in here to give you a prescription—”

“Shall I take them back?” Loki sniped. Tony immediately held the papers to his chest.

“No take backs,” Tony said. Loki grinned, close lipped, in the corner of his mouth. Tony couldn’t tell if it was out of pleasure or aggression.

Loki let him leave without comment, and Tony went to the lab. He shoved some books and posters aside, knocking a frame to the ground as he climbed up on a desk. With tape he fixed the design up on the wall.

He sat back, admiring it.

Alright, so Asgardian technology was beautiful. Not that Tony had to admit as much, but this scramble of notes was more magnificent than any of the multi-million dollar canvases upstairs in the board rooms.

- - -

“Stop twittering about me like some deranged bird,” Loki snapped at Tony the next day. The man had barely been in the room for a minute.

“I don’t even have a twitter account,” Tony said, joking weakly. “PR took it away from me.”

“Stark,” Loki said forcefully. The hard glint in his eye had Tony pressing himself back towards the exit.

“Okay, okay,” Tony said, holding his hands up. “Sorry to disturb you, your highness.” He left, unaware of the enraged tantrum of frustration that he had interrupted. It continued the rest of the day, until Loki at last flung himself into bed with a long cut across his fingers.

- - -

Tony didn’t visit again for a week. The visits to Loki had delayed it, but now he was back to the usual. By Friday he found himself pressed to a wall by a tall strawberry blond man in a club on West 17th Street. He sighed as the man rocked against him, trailing his lips up Tony’s neck. The blonde stopped and pulled out one of his diamond cufflinks with his teeth. He spit it onto the floor with a sideways glance at Tony. “You can buy me new ones when we’re finished,” he whispered seductively.

A thread in Tony snapped. He pushed the man off of him with the back of his hand, stumbling a little bit tipsily as he walked to the exit. All of the attraction he’d felt evaporated in an instant. The rejected man yelled lurid insults after him. Tony just gave him the middle finger as he stepped out the door.

If the man just wanted to have his credit card, he should’ve said so.

- - -

Tony woke up in his lab the next morning, not remembering what had transpired between the club and his bed on the cold floor. There was an empty bottle beside him and he could guess as much. He stared up from the concrete. He was too sore to move.

The design pages were the perfect focal distance away. He grinned stupidly, staring at them.

- - -

Loki stared at the long cut running across his fingers. He'd done worse to himself in his anguish on Asgard, but it had gone ignored by the guards. Bruce had noticed a couple of drops of blood on the floor when he came in the evening, and Loki had woken up to his hand being examined.

It was nothing serious. It seemed like it was healing beneath the bandaids. He'd stubbornly peeled them off the first couple of days, but someone always came in to replace them. He had finally just given up.

He didn't intend to keep reopening the cuts, it just kept happening.

He stretched his fingers out. Three of the bandaids were a tan, fleshy sort of color. He supposed that they were supposed to match his own skin. The last had Captain America shields brightly printed all over it. Steve had sworn, *sworn* that he wasn't doing it on purpose, they were just out of regular bandaids, and he'd buy some the next time he was out.

Loki was still looking at them when Tony came in.

Loki apathetically raised one eyebrow to assess the man. Then he went back to staring at his fingers. "Hey," Tony said, sitting down. "So that design." The plastic surface of the bandaid was slick beneath Loki's fingertip. "I put it—what's that?"

Loki turned his head away. The attention was utterly unnecessary and he wished that it would cease immediately. "You got Steve's bandaids?" Tony asked accusingly. "I have to say, I am a little bit offended." Loki slipped his hand down to the side where Tony could no longer see it. "I have a million Iron Man ones. I'll get you one. Why are you wearing those anyway?"

Loki ripped off one of the flesh colored ones and dropped it on the floor. Tony stretched over to the side, craning his neck around to see Loki's hand and missing the cue that perhaps, he should just leave it alone. "Ugh," Tony said.

"Child," Loki said derisively. "It's fine." He peeled off the second and flicked it at Tony. The man emitted an immature pleading sound, brushing the bandage onto the floor.

"You're gross," Tony said, standing back up. "I'm going to go get another one."

It satisfied Loki to see him leave like that.

He came back fifteen minutes later carrying a box of Iron Man branded bandages. Loki had dropped all of the tan colored ones on the floor. He kept the Captain America one. "No," he said when Tony offered him one. "I only like this one." He held the finger up proudly, fondly inspecting it.

"Now you're being difficult."

“Am I showing you up?” Loki asked shortly. Tony opened his mouth to argue, certain that he was being insulted. But then he closed it. He peeled one of the bandaids open.

“Fine,” Tony said. “I’ll wear it myself.” He wrapped it around his finger. “Sexy.”

Loki snorted. Tony picked up another bandaid, making a show of admiring it. It was so painfully obvious that he wanted Loki to take it. Whether that was because he wanted bragging rights against Steve or to assuage his own ego, Loki couldn’t tell.

He did see that it could be spun to his advantage.

“Answer my questions and I will take your foolish bandage,” Loki said. As he said it the cut on his index finger oozed a drop of blood. He wiped it on his trousers, shooting Tony a threatening look when it seemed that Tony was about to say something about proper care nonsense.

“Alright,” Tony said.

“Tell me who Pepper is,” Loki said. He knew the name, and had a vague sense of how the person played into the situation, but he did not have an extensive knowledge. It intrigued him that it was a name that Tony had dropped.

“No way,” Tony said. “Not even a bandaid as wonderful as this is worth that.”

“Fine,” Loki said. “We’ll start simpler. Why don’t you tell me why I had the pleasure of your absence this week?”

“Did you miss me?” Tony asked sarcastically.

“No,” Loki said with a high note. “I merely wish to lower your guard by asking a dull question.”

“Uh-huh,” Tony said, not knowing what to do with that response. “Well, I remembered what shit the dating scene is when everyone knows your face and that you have money.” He grinned, but he couldn’t make it sound any less bitter. “Not that I was looking for anything serious, but I would’ve liked to pretend. You know?”

Loki stuck out his pointer finger at Tony. For a moment Tony did nothing. Then Loki heard the bandage come free of its thin wrapping. He didn’t turn and give Stark the satisfaction of thinking that he cared. Tony wrapped the bandaid around Loki’s finger slowly, not sure if he felt like a servant or a friend.

“What is it that you’re looking for then?” Loki asked. The words were dense, and Tony was having a hard time detecting their tone.

“I don’t know,” he said, letting out a sigh. “Fuck. Why?”

“I’m the one asking the questions.”

Tony glared at him and then unpeeled another bandage. “Fine, but that counts as an answer.” Loki stuck out his middle finger, and was surprised when Tony made a sharp sound. Then he laughed.

“What?” Loki demanded.

Tony wrapped the bandaid around his slender finger, gently smoothing the adhesive down. “If you flip the middle finger at someone here, it’s really offensive. You can try it out the next time you’re mad. Don’t say I didn’t teach you anything.”

“Strange,” Loki said dismissively. A few drops of blood fell from his ring finger onto the floor. He and Tony both stared at the crimson circlets. Loki’s foot tipped down anxiously against the barstool. He presumed the cuts were reopening themselves in relation to his disordered magic, and he did not believe that it was a good sign.

“You’d better make the next question quick,” Tony said.

“Tell me about Pepper,” Loki said, wiping his finger against his shirt.

“I already said no,” Tony said. It was the first time that Loki had heard true anger in his voice. He was going to quit playing the game.

“You cannot fault me for trying,” Loki said quickly.

“Can’t I?” Tony shook the box of bandages, listening to the rumble they made.

Loki bit down on his bottom lip. He could feel one of the loose memories coming on. He just had to hold out a little longer. He wanted to finish the game. “Weeks ago I heard your voice and Foster’s outside my door but neither of you came inside.”

Tony’s hands froze. Slowly, he returned to shaking the box. The bandaids made a weak shuffling sound. “We...” He licked his lip. “Didn’t mean to come down here.”

“You got lost in your own home?” Loki said, his self-assured words laced with judgment.

“No,” Tony said, staring at him deadpan. “We were drunk, okay?”

“Oh,” Loki said. Tony wasn’t sure if he was imagining it, or if he really did sound disappointed. Loki held out his ring finger. He knew the next wave was coming.

Tony wrapped the finger slowly, holding more of Loki’s hand than was necessary to steady it. His skin felt rough and thick against Loki’s softer, longer hands. A row of Iron Masks greeted Loki when he slipped his hand away. “How quaint,” he droned, holding up his hand to examine it. His eyes could not stay focused.

Loki stood and took a few steps towards the bed, before lowering himself into it. Instead of staring at the ceiling, he closed his eyes. He could hear screams in his ears already. “What is it you’re so fond of saying?” He asked. In his mind it sounded loud and important, but it came out only as a whisper. “Playtime is over.”

Tony stayed still on the barstool. He’d stopped rattling the bandaid box. There was a knot forming in his stomach. Steve kept saying that no one could figure out what this was, and Loki himself had blamed it on magic at some point. Tony didn’t believe in magic. Not in the cure-all sense. He ducked down to the floor and picked up the old bandages, tossing them into the trash.

He set the full Iron Man bandages box on the counter, moving the edges so that it was perfectly aligned with the corners of the counter. Just so that he could stay a little longer. He glanced back over at the bed. The knot in his stomach tightened.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” he promised.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

Tempers flare as Loki and Tony fail to understand the other.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki sat hunched at the end of the bed, facing the door. He slowly pried the second bandage off, watching his skin peel back away from the colorful design.

The finger had not healed. It oozed another drop of blood, looking the same as the moment it had been cut.

He moved on to the next one.

He dropped the bandages to the floor, where they stuck to the dark concrete. He still had two cut fingers. He traced his finger over one of the open cuts. He willed his magic to seep down in. He could feel it fighting for entry, repelled against itself. He tried until his finger burned. It was utterly incapable of healing. He wondered how the other two had healed themselves, and if these two would in time.

Loki leaned down, pinching the bridge of his nose. He couldn't figure out what was happening. Maybe if he'd had access to libraries in Asgard he could find an answer. As it was, he'd scoured through every likely Midgardian book, hoping for a trace of magical instruction left behind by some interstellar traveler before. So far, there was nothing.

He grabbed the box of bandages from the nightstand and wrapped his two fingers. He grinned, imagining the chatter that would pour from Stark's mouth when he saw them.

Steve had visited in the early morning, and Loki had caught a tiny smile tucked away on Steve's lips when he saw the bandages. He'd acted as though nothing was unusual, his chest puffed out in Loki's memory as it always was, whether Steve really walked like that or not. The Captain had given him a rainbow box of markers and a notepad.

Loki had left them on the counter, confused by Steve's evident amusement and Midgardians in general. They were so occupied by things like bandages (really, why were they colorful to begin with? Why, by the nine, did they all print their costumed faces on them?) and his food preferences (he hadn't found this unusual until he realized that Bruce was systematically running a trial and error menu on him) and checkers (a dull, dull, dull game, no wonder they were all so stupid). Then there was the voice in the ceiling that piped up from time to time to pester him. Loki assumed that Jarvis had a grudge against him. It was mutual.

He rubbed his finger against the plastic bandage, wondering hopelessly how he was going to occupy his lucid hours today.

The door came open.

Tony strode in, sunny and grinning. "Hey," he said, taking a seat on a barstool like he was home.



Loki could see Tony's face fall when he spotted the box of markers. He snatched it, holding it up against the light like it contained a hidden message. "I think I'm being made fun of," he said. Tony dropped the box on the counter and flipped the notepad open. "Oh!" He exclaimed, his voice a mingle of enthusiasm and jealousy. "Steve gave you one of his drawings? He never even lets me *look* at them." Tony flipped the notepad closed with a pout on his face. He turned expectantly to Loki.

Loki was watching him with the tolerance of a parent with small children. "Stark," he said after letting Tony squirm in his gaze for a bit, "is it customary for you to barge into other's rooms and rifle through their possessions, or am I just lucky?"

"You're definitely lucky," Tony said. "Because I'm here." He grinned proudly, turning back around. Loki's footsteps padded up alongside him.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Tony said. There was an uncapped red marker in his hand, and Loki knew deviousness when he saw it.

Loki's pale hand plucked the notepad away. "Contain yourself," he said, tossing the notepad over onto the bed. Tony's open mouth tumbled over itself to smile appeasingly. Loki detected a trace of bashfulness in the man. His verdant eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"So," Tony said. He glanced down at the floor. "How're you feeling today?"

There it was. That was the source of the shyness. Loki crossed his arms, leaning back against the countertop.

His lips twisted back towards his sharp cheeks as he calculated an answer. "Fine," he said curtly.

The answer seemed to have a soothing effect on the man. He sat up taller, ready to launch into the charming babble he was so adept at.

"And how might you be faring?" Loki asked.

"Great," Tony answered instantly. Loki glanced over at him, painting his face with layer upon layer of blunt skepticism. "I've got a new Iron Man toy line coming out, Stark Industries went up this quarter, Fury hasn't asked me for anything, you remember Fury," he said, raising an eyebrow tauntingly. "What could be wrong?"

"You are not a gifted liar," Loki said.

"And you are?" Tony retorted. The defensive words left his mouth without a thought.

"No," Loki said, leaning his head back. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat as his lips pulled back in a cruel smile. "Did you believe me just now?" He asked, glancing sideways at Tony.

"Whatever," Tony said. He tried to balance his feet back up against the pole of the barstool. They slid back down with each time. His shoes left long scuffs on the shiny metal. Tony ran his tongue along his teeth, debating.

Loki was fine. Breathing. He had even said that he was fine. He wasn't passed out on the bed now, and he was back to being his usual bastard self. More or less. Good, right?

Tony's chest expanded in a deep breath. It was true that Stark Industries was doing well, but it flew

pretty well without him. Somehow, after their relationship had ended, Pepper had miraculously managed to halve the number of appearance requests she made to him. Assistants brought the things that needed to be signed.

He avoided Stark Industries as it was, but without it to entertain him there was only the lab. The lab that was starting to collect dust and couldn't hold his attention for more than ten minutes.

Rhodey, Bruce, Natasha, and Clint were all working. Jane and Darcy were working. Steve was working. In the tower, but he'd banned Tony from sulking around his floor today. Something about needing quiet space to think and write his speech. Steve was doing a lot of school tours, lately.

Tony sighed. He turned his head to the side, looking at Loki.

He grinned.

"So what's on the menu today, Bugs?"

"What?"

"It's a trickster cartoon rabbit—oh, never mind," Tony said. He combed his fingers back through his hair before scratching at the back of his neck. Then he spotted the Iron Man bandages on Loki's fingers. He smiled, about to say something, when he noticed that two were missing. Loki saw Tony's face go pensive. He could practically feel the gears turning in the man's head, noticing the perfect skin on the freed fingers, and the blood beneath the bandaged ones.

Loki hid the injured hand beneath the other. "They heal at different rates," he said, like it was normal.

"Oh," Tony said. He frowned, turning his head a little, still trying to look. "And that's because?"

Loki's gaze stayed imperiously aimed towards the wall, the stack of books by his bed. He had an uncomfortable churn deep in his stomach. Loki was unaccustomed to the constant concern, and it seemed to be the Avengers' default emotion. He wasn't sure what to do with it. A warm drop of blood seeped from beneath the bandage and trailed slowly down his wrist.

He pressed his shirt sleeve against it, hoping that it would disguise the stain.

"Okay," Tony said.

When Loki glanced back Tony was on the verge of standing up. Loki's brow furrowed. "The heat in this room is unsatisfactory," he said.

"Yeah?" Tony asked. Loki watched him slide away from the barstool.

"Perhaps you could—"

"Do you want my help or not?" Tony snapped.

He rubbed his hands against his face. He hadn't meant to snap. He didn't know where it had come from. "I mean," he said, "there's a thermostat on the wall." Tony took a few steps towards it. "I'll show you how it works," he said wearily.

Loki kneaded his hands together in his lap, blinking his eyes rapidly. He slid off the barstool, standing on heavy legs. Time crawled between the few steps in-between himself and Tony. The man stood perfectly still until Loki was looking over his shoulder. "You adjust the temperature like

this,” he said, tapping on the arrows. “Up, down. This one’s programmed to change itself at certain times, but you can change it if you’re uncomfortable.” Tony’s voice sounded unnaturally formal.

Somewhere, in the furthest corner of his mind, Loki felt an urge to reach out and touch Tony’s shoulder. He suppressed it immediately. “Understood,” Loki said.

They both stood still.

Tony could hear Loki’s uncertain breathing just above his own heavy heartbeats.

“It is close to when Steve brings an afternoon meal,” Loki announced, walking back over to the counter.

“Steve’s busy today,” Tony said. “I’ll go get it,” he said, jumping on the opportunity out.

Tony let out a huge sigh when he made it into the elevator. He didn’t know why he’d snapped. Patience was beyond him lately. He pecked his finger against the kitchen floor key, glaring at the numbers as they systematically lit.

His shoes squeaked against the kitchen tiles. He threw open the refrigerator door. There was three week old take out food, Clint’s protein shakes, some sort of meat substitute, coffee creamers, a spare egg rolling around... Tony stood up and sighed.

Ten minutes later he was slamming his car door and driving off, irritably unaware of the gorgeous summer day outside his window. He ducked in and out of a deli where he knew the owner wouldn’t hassle him or let customers mob him. With a heavy brown paper bag under his arm he returned to Loki’s room, gruffly dropping it on the counter.

Loki was lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling with his black hair fanned out around his face. He sat up slowly, just recently reprieved from a memory of his childhood.

“Well,” Tony said, his keys jingling in his pocket, “I hope you like pastrami.”

The bag crinkled and rustled in protest as Tony laid everything out. With the task finished, he felt a little better. He sat down.

Loki took the sandwich without comment, and as he took the first bite, coriander and pepper scented the air. Tony filled the silence with a shallow recounting of his trip to the deli. Loki ate slowly, openly watching Tony, studying him. He was, maybe, a little thinner. It was hard to tell exactly with the screened t-shirt he was wearing. There was a line of stubble like a ribbon along his jaw that he had missed shaving. He had a tendency to flex his hands against his jeans, digging his stubby nails down into the denim.

Loki had read about Tony in the history book. He knew better than to take a book at face value, especially a history one (as if he’d needed reminding, the Norse mythology one was laughably outrageous). But this was not the same man.

He wiped the juice sliding down his chin against his sleeve, reminding Tony of a cat.

Tony could read the intrigue spinning in Loki’s alert eyes, the careful motions he made as he pushed the sandwich wrapper aside. His long nail trailed down the paper, tightly creasing it. Connecting the dots between this Tony and the other would be a welcome distraction from thinking about Asgard.

He subconsciously traced the line along his jaw that matched the stubble on Tony’s. “I suspect you

would like something,” he said. “That drink you owe me, perhaps?”

“Don’t get cute,” Tony said.

“I am incapable of cute,” Loki said snidely. He tucked the back of his hand under his chin, leaning down against the counter.

“Says the guy wearing bandaids.”

Loki stared at him thoughtfully for a split second before holding up his middle finger. “You mean this one?” He asked innocently.

“So you do learn.”

“Apparently.”

“Is that why you haven’t tried to throw me through there?” Tony asked, nodding his head towards the tiny slit of a window.

“Don’t be imbecilic, Stark. Even your willowy form could not fit through there.” He grinned, but Tony did not.

“So you don’t learn, then? Is that why Thor threw you back here?” Tony asked, taking a jab that he felt was equal to the one Loki had given him. Unaware that he had stepped on one of Tony’s sore spots, Loki’s anger kindled at Tony’s uncalled for provocation.

“Perhaps it was so that I could pity your poor Midgardian lives,” Loki said darkly. “Perhaps it was so that I could pity you the way Thor does. Then I might feel an iota of regret for attempting to save you from your own stupidity on this dying planet.” His hands went cold as the words hissed from his throat.

“That’s your problem,” Tony said. Pressure was building inside of him. “You never want to take responsibility for anything you do.”

“I did nothing wrong,” Loki snapped.

“Yes you did,” Tony said. His voice soared. “And the least, the very fucking least you could do is admit it. Have we not taken care of you since you got here? Jesus, you act like everything is owed to you. Why are you so put out, huh?”

Suddenly he was aware that he was standing.

Loki was too. “As if you don’t have motives,” he sneered. It felt so good to have something to push back at, some friction to work against. He’d been treated like porcelain since he’d arrived.

“I do?” Tony said incredulously. “Why don’t you tell me what they are then, because I sure as hell don’t know.” He was breathing faster, and thrilled by it. God, did it feel good to have an argument again. Everyone had treated him with varying degrees of pity and caution since his breakup.

Loki’s lips twisted up into a vicious sneer. “You’re right,” he said condescendingly. “You Midgardians are too inferior to even conceive of motives. You are only far too eager to show how kind you are. Is that because you believe yourselves heroes?”

Tony scoffed, rolling his eyes derisively away. “Well then I’d be taking a page from your book, wouldn’t I? Mister I’m not enslaving the earth, I’m just subjugating it.” He pouted theatrically at

Loki. "They can't take care of themselves, the poor babies."

"Well you certainly can't," Loki said.

He'd intended it to strike hard. He hadn't intended for it to send Tony head first into rage.

"You don't know me," Tony yelled. "You don't know the first thing about me!"

"And I can say the same of myself!" Loki yelled. His chest fluttered up and down in hurried breaths. "You know nothing of my culture or my home! Yet you still presume to know everything of Asgard, and why? You know my oaf of a brother? I will not apologize to you for my imagined slights."

"Just admit you were wrong," Tony said, the whites of his eyes blaring. "Admit it!" Loki just stared at him, eyes wild, body stiff.

All of a sudden Tony feared that Loki would just throw himself in the bed, or demand that Tony leave. Tony needed to argue. "Quit acting like you're the only person that's fucked up."

"Is that to mean," Loki said, just as desperate for the argument to go on, "that I am hopelessly broken or that I have sinned? Which is it, Stark?"

Tony's heart pounded. Heat seared into his face and chest, but he felt more himself than he had in months. "I fucked up," Tony said between gritted teeth.

"Oh?" Loki asked. He smiled coldly. "Is this a ploy?"

"No, not everyone's a manipulative little shit like you," Tony sniped back. The door opened.

Loki and Tony turned to see Steve's apprehensive face in the doorway. "What's going on?" He demanded.

"Nothing," Tony said.

"We're fine," Loki said.

Steve's eyebrows turned down over his sharp blue eyes. "Steve, we're fine," Tony insisted. He glanced over at Loki, sensing camaraderie. The god's eyes met his, seeking the same thing.

"There is no need to interfere," Loki said. Steve let go of the doorframe, leaning back on one of his feet. He hesitated, and then stepped into the room.

"Can you just not?" Tony asked, his voice rising up. "We said we were fine, you don't need to baby us."

"Your interference is quite unwarranted," Loki said.

"Jarvis disagreed," Steve said in his defense. "He seems to think that Tony is in imminent danger."

"Jarvis is an idiot," Loki said.

"Watch it," Tony snapped.

"I am not—" Jarvis began.

"Shut up Jarvis," Tony said.

Steve took in a deep breath. He stepped back to the doorframe, turning his head. Tony could see that he was angry, and that an apology would be needed. That could come later. He had to leave now, he was ruining the momentum. Steve bit his bottom lip, glancing away from them for a moment. Then he stepped backwards, shutting the door.

Tony and Loki turned back to each other, equally ready to fight. They wore matching aggressive, reckless grins. “I said,” Tony growled, seizing the opportunity to go first, “You’re not the only person in the universe to fuck something up.”

“Ah yes,” Loki said. “You were about to start on some charming anecdote, I am certain.”

“Sometimes,” Tony said, “you have to realize that you had a hand in your own undoing, don’t you?”

“Stark,” Loki said, his nose crinkling up in scorn. He said his words softly, like he was offering a precious token of advice. “Sometimes, if you want to be understood, you have to *explain*.” He turned his open palm contemptuously on his wrist. “I cannot be expected to read your little mind.”

Tony glared back coldly at him, high on the adrenaline singing like a siren in his veins. He wanted to keep yelling. He wanted to feel his throat strain with his words. But Steve had ruined that moment. Tony could feel the stoked coal of the argument fizzing out, exhaustion wrapping its long arms around him despite his desire to continue. Loki looked the same, pushing at the limits of his overburdened body. They were both liars as they flashed smiles, acting like they had just begun. “How can I explain it to you,” Tony said, trying to twist it in his favor, “when you’re breathing down my neck?”

“Fine,” Loki said, striding contemptuously over to a barstool. “Explain away,” he said, flicking his wrist towards the empty seat. Internally he was relieved that the fight was going in this direction. He didn’t want to give it up any more than Tony did, but he knew how easy it was to trigger the loose memories in his head. It was a miracle he had made it this far. The seat was a welcome support.

Tony turned stubbornly away, sitting on the bed instead. The mattress sinking beneath him was a relief. He was starting to shake a little, and he hoped that Loki didn’t notice. He had seen Loki’s eyes lose their focus and come back, so he assumed that Loki was no better off. He kept up the front.

Tony grinned ominously. “Listen closely, precious. I’m not going to repeat myself.”

## Chapter End Notes

Loki’s certainly borrowing Thor’s *imagined slights* line, though it’s probably not a conscious decision.

## Chapter 12

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The wide set teeth of the comb dug meticulous rows in Tony's hair. He watched the pattern being born in the mirror, knowing dead certain that he looked incredible.

Maybe, theoretically, his hair was a little thinner than it had been in his younger days, but no one would notice. Not when he looked like this. He grinned, adjusting his tie, leaning in close to the glass. Since the other Avengers had taken up a more permanent residence status at the tower, Tony had spent a lot more time in the Iron Man suit, and his muscular physique showed it. He grinned in the mirror, tilting his head deviously down as he evaluated himself again.

He knew the words that Pepper would say to him by heart. Knew the spark that would light in her eyes and disappear behind her hand or her drink as she pretended to care more about business than him. But he knew she would be watching out the corner of her eye the whole evening through.

The hotel ballroom was magnificently bedecked in golden orbs and soft light. There was a steady roar of happy chatter in the room, and at the far end a musician played on a grand piano. Tony walked tall, scanning the room for his familiar strawberry blonde.

"I think I saw her go that way," an assistant said a few minutes later, when he'd finally given in and resorted to asking. Usually Pepper was easy to spot—elegant, charming, surrounded by people. He followed the direction he'd been pointed in, pushing past people until he hit a dead end in front of a dark, empty hallway. He stopped, frowning at the empty space.

He turned back, scanning the ballroom again. He took out his phone. His sent text was still unanswered.

Tony decided to stop in the bathroom before resuming the search. He glanced back down the hallway. They were probably that way. He started walking along the plush, unimaginative hotel carpeting. A few doors down there was an open closet with event chairs stacked up to the ceiling, its fluorescent light pouring into the hallway. Tony passed it with a sideways glance, seeing no one.

He hadn't reached the end of the hall, but he decided that it was the wrong direction. Thinking nothing of it, he turned to go back to the ballroom.

Then he heard an aroused gasp come from the back of the hall. Tony smirked, mentally congratulating the lucky bastards as he hurried to leave. "I think they're gone," a voice whispered.

The blood in Tony's veins turned cold. He knew that voice. "Probably just a janitor or somebody," a voice whispered back. He heard a thud against the wall. Tony closed his eyes, breathing in tightly through his nostrils. He had to be wrong.

The breathy sounds coming from the back of the wall screamed in the soft shells of his ears. He couldn't move.

He knew that he recognized the voice, he just didn't want to admit it.

Ding! A text. Ding! Ding!

Tony took his phone from his pocket with a trembling hand.

*Where are you? A text from Rhodey. Come find me. Tony scrolled down to the next text. FYI, Thor is drinking and asking weird questions. I call not it on answering them.*

Tony couldn't smile at the text. His lip was trembling.

"Tony?" A startled voice blurted out behind him. Tony turned around rigidly, rage slipping into his features.

Pepper was standing there in a pale blue dress, pulling the strap back onto her shoulder. She gawked at him. "How did you—"

"Who's that?" Tony snapped, staring at the man standing uncomfortably behind her.

"That's Jeff. From accounting," Pepper said, as though Tony should've recognized him.

"That's not what I asked!" Tony yelled.

Pepper recovered from shock. She stood up straight, smoothing back her hair. A tight, resigned line set in her lips. "You should go," she said quietly to Jeff.

He brushed his back against the wall trying to avoid Tony.

Tony didn't care to look at him. He stayed in the center of the hallway, glowering at Pepper.

"What the hell was that," he demanded. "And don't lie to me."

"That," Pepper said sharply, "has been coming for a long time," she finished quietly. As if saying the words exhausted her.

"How long has *that* been going on?" Tony asked, clenching his teeth.

"A few months," Pepper said. Tony could not decide whether her languid resignation or lack of remorse made him angrier.

"A few months!?"

His mind raced to fill in the past few months. Their trip to New Orleans. Talking about retirement. Ordering that stupid couch for the rebuilt house in Malibu. Toasting on the rooftop of the tower together. Waking up to Pepper's alarm clock every morning and sleepily kissing her goodbye before she left. Had someone else really been there the entire time?

"This isn't the right place for this right now," Pepper said.

"Where is the right place, Pepper?" Tony asked. It sounded pleading and hateful all at once.

"At home," Pepper said. She brushed her hand against his arm as she left the hall, leaving him without a backwards glance. Tony turned, shock setting in as he watched her vanish into the ballroom.

After a moment he brushed off the place on his arm that she had touched.

He didn't text Rhodey back. He didn't call or text anyone. He left the party and went "home".



He walked into their shared bedroom. Instantly it was suffocating.

First he picked up the picture of them on the nightstand. Pepper's face smiled back up at him, burnt like his own in the Hawaiian sun. He dropped it on the floor, apathetically watching the glass crack and splinter. His eyes fell to the bed.

He couldn't stand to look at it. The quiet, deceitful twist of aubergine sheets. Tony hesitated for a moment, but then he couldn't stand it. He tore them off, abandoning them in a pile at the foot of the bed. He stepped on it as he walked into the closet.

It was full of Pepper's clothes. Most of which Pepper had bought and he'd liked. Some were gifts from him. The hangers screeched against the rail as he tore them free, flinging them onto the floor. Not thinking, he tore each shirt down, hating himself for every associated memory that presented itself. The shirt she'd worn on vacation. The one when they reopened the tower. The one she wore on lazy Sundays together.

When there was nothing left of the bedroom, he moved on to the hallway. "Jesus," Pepper swore when she found him dropping the third glass frame onto the floor. She slipped the heels in her hands back on. "I should've known you'd react like a child," she growled under her breath, walking over broken glass to get into the bedroom. "Really?" She yelled.

Clothes and sheets were strewn all over the floor. She kicked her heels off, digging through the piles for something more comfortable. Her arm twisted around her back, yanking the dress zipper down. She tugged and tugged at it until at last she was free, slipping out of the crumpled dress. She left it on the floor, unrolling a long sleeved shirt over her head. She hurriedly tugged her pants on, ignoring Tony as he stood in the doorway.

She glared at him as she did her hair back in a ponytail, daring him to speak.

"Go on," she said. "Say it."

"Say what?" Tony asked. "That the woman I built my life around is a fucking liar?" He crossed his arms against his chest, still wearing his stiff dress shirt. "Do I really need to state the obvious?"

Pepper combed her fingers through ponytail, tightly pressing her lips together. She had spent a lot of time imagining how this moment would happen. It had not prepared her for the sick clenching feeling in her stomach.

"How many times did you say you loved me while you were thinking about him?" Tony asked. His jaw was tight. His brow was furrowed and tense. But his eyes were desperate.

"It wasn't some calculated thing," Pepper said. "It wasn't planned...it just happened."

"It just happened? You just happened to be having an affair? What, did you switch up our names on your day calendar and not catch your mistake?"

"Oh ha ha," Pepper snapped. Her shoulders shook as she took in a breath, glaring at Tony. "Do you know what I like about him, Tony?"

"Oh please, tell me all the things you like about that bastard. I'm just dying to hear."

She licked her lips, gathering herself together. "I don't have to beg him to do shit," she said. At first her voice trembled, but then it steadied in directed anger. "He doesn't moan about every event like some child. How many times did I have to ask you to come to tonight's event?" The terse, pointed anger she was so adept at crumbled into something feral.

"I do so much for you Tony, and you are never grateful." Pepper cut off what he was about to say in his defense. "I feel like I have to be your mother all the time. If I'm not running your business, I'm here asking you to remember that we had dinner plans together, or to please, please be here to let the delivery guy in with the couch. And you still forget!" Pepper screamed, her face flushed red. "You act like I'm this anal retentive monster that lives to force you into doing things all the time. How is that any fun for me? Why do you think it is that you get to play around in your lab all day or go out drinking and smash your face all over the tabloids? Your business doesn't run itself! Who do you think cleans up your messes?" She waited a split second for him to answer, watching his face collapse as the words soaked in. "And if I'm not cleaning up after you, I'm watching you try to kill yourself on some Avenger's mission! Usually, on the news! Without a single word from you about it!" Her arms waved wildly from her sides. "I'm sick of it! I'm sick of taking care of you!"

Tony couldn't think of a single thing to say. His brain was blank. He felt a horrible ache in his chest. It hurt too much to be angry. "But Pepper," he said. "We..."

"No," Pepper said. "You know," she said, smiling rigidly, unkindly. "I was with you for so long that I forgot how it feels to be with someone that treats you like another adult."

"Pepper," Tony said. She had her hand on her wallet, and he knew that at any moment she'd walk through that door. The thought terrified him. "Don't." He smiled, a tremor running across his lips. "I told you a relationship with me was going to be messy. I know I don't deserve you, but you're perfect, Pep. I love you."

Pepper threw her head back in a cry of frustration. "That is exactly the problem! You've got it stuck in your head that I'm perfect! You won't even let me be human!" She tucked her wallet into her back pocket, checking her purse for her phone and keys. "Like you're the only one that has broken parts?" She asked, her voice breaking. "I can't do this anymore, Tony. I can't hold up your whole world and pretend to be perfect at the same time. I can't." She closed her purse, stepping over a pile of clothes.

"Pep, we can fix this," Tony said, trying to keep her from the door. He stepped into a pile of clothes as he walked towards her. She ignored him.

He didn't care about anything else at that moment, not how angry or hurt he was, just that she stayed.

She moved past him.

Tony watched her walk out the door, and with her, his faith in relationships.

Numb, Tony fell onto the bare mattress.

He stared up at the ceiling, closing his eyes when he heard the front door slam closed downstairs.

He hadn't known that she'd felt that way.

He rolled over to the side of the bed, staring down at the cracked frame on the floor. How long had she resented him?

Pepper had been with him since the beginning. He'd always known that no matter what he got up to, Pepper would still be there, simply because she always had been. He'd never even had to think about trusting her.

Already he hated himself for not realizing sooner. Ever. How long would the affair have gone on if he hadn't happened upon them? Had she ever planned on telling him?

He stayed in the same spot until the sun came up.

He got into the shower still wearing his clothes from the night before. The hot water soaked down into his shirt, turning it into a heavy, translucent second skin. He closed his eyes, lowering his face into the steady stream.

The water pounded against the glass door, pooling against the blocked drain. Tony had dropped his heavy trousers when it felt like they were drowning him. The water rose up to his ankles. He stripped off the rest of his clothes, dumping them outside the shower door in a tidal wave. He slumped down, sitting against the back of the shower, listening to the steady drumbeat falling from the shower head.

He hadn't been completely serious when he said he was a billionaire playboy. He had always thought that Pepper saw right through the act. He had always counted on her to reel him in when he got out too far. He had thought that they were in it together. He hadn't thought that she was... taking care of him.

*Do I need someone to take care of me?* Tony thought. *Is that what everyone thinks?*

It was embarrassing too. He wondered how many people knew about the infidelity. Did everyone at Stark Industries know?

And if Pepper was so comfortable tossing him aside, the person that knew him best, that he trusted and loved the most, *then who the hell else is going to stay with me?* Tony thought.

He found himself thinking of Obadiah Stone, and a long string of people that had only been waiting on his demise until he felt entirely alone in the world.

He only stepped out of the shower that morning when he had fully convinced himself that Pepper had only been tolerating him all of this time. That she had never loved him to begin with.

They would figure out moving out of their shared house, and the work situation, and the "whys" in the months to come. Pepper got sick of answering why. Sometimes she said she still loved him, but she never mentioned getting back together. Tony stopped asking her why she did it the night that she told him that the affair had been an easy way out of something that had already ended. Tony never stopped questioning though, and running through scenarios in his head of how he could've stopped it, or more and more, how it was his fault.

If he'd just done things differently then he wouldn't be alone.

Or maybe it was that he deserved to be alone?

When he wasn't agonizing, he was furious with Pepper for ruining the life they'd planned. He was bitter and angry and ashamed and resentful and it just went wash, rinse, repeat all day long.

Tony stared down at his hands, twisted together in his lap. He didn't know what he'd expected to gain when he'd started telling this story.

It had sounded twisted and angry in his recounting, and Tony hadn't delivered it softly.

Tony thought that maybe he'd intended to shame Loki into submission, as if offering up the bloodiest, most wounded part of himself in sacrifice would ordain him with the right to silence Loki's claim at being the more wounded between them. As if knowing that about Tony would stop

Loki from acting like the only victim in the world. Or some selfish nonsense like that.

It didn't.

Loki's dark eyes just stayed contemplatively upon him.

Maybe, Tony thought, it was just that he needed to say it and Loki was there. Tony had been holding onto it for months. He'd never even told Rhodey the details. Not even after Rhodey had found him plastered on his bathroom floor and called an ambulance.

"I fail to see," Loki said, only when he was certain that Tony was finished, "how that is a shining example of you having a hand in your own undoing." He brushed his hands down his thighs, sighing. "That was the point in your story, if I recall correctly."

"Don't you get it?" Tony asked. "If I had been better to Pepper, if I had made her feel like she could depend on me, she wouldn't have cheated."

"Relationships fail all the time," Loki said indifferently. The sound of Tony's frustrated heave of breath filled the room. "Do you really think blaming yourself for her actions makes it any less her choice?"

"She betrayed you." Loki's face was a peculiar contortion of confusion, scorn, and concern. "You," he said, pressing his hand against his clammy forehead, "are...interesting," he decided, as though that were the only word in all the worlds left at his disposal.

Tony smoothed the bed beside him, thinking. "You've never tried blaming yourself for your fall from Asgard?" The words came curiously, lacking any hard edge.

Loki glanced out the dark window. He had no intention of delving into his self-hatred with Stark. "My so-called father stole me from the land of my birth. My so-called brother was only too eager to align himself with another realm to have a hand in my destruction." He wrapped one foot back around the pole of the barstool. "I was raised by liars and now I am the one they call liar."

Loki swallowed, turning his beguiling face back towards Tony. "A story for another time."

Tony rubbed at his temples, closing his eyes.

He grinned. "If I sneak you a drink, swear to god that you won't tell."

Loki lifted his head with interest. He spoke softly. "I swear to Loki that I won't tell," he said, grinning mischievously.

"That's good enough for me," Tony said, standing up. He returned five minutes later with two open beers in his hand. He sat beside Loki at the counter.

"I have to admit," Loki said. "This is not how I envisioned having this drink."

"Oh?" Tony took a sip. His body ached from mental exhaustion. "How was it?"

"More bloody," Loki said.

"Of course it was," Tony said. He grinned humorlessly, unsurprised, and took another drink from the bottle.

"Not to fear," Loki said. "I have not planned your death today."

“You’re such a charmer,” Tony said, his voice thick with sarcasm.

They drank slowly, mutually hesitant to lose the company. When Tony got to the bottom of his bottle, Loki started telling him things about Asgard. Just so he wouldn’t leave. The god knew he would be awake for hours still, until sleep or a memory took him. It was better with company tonight.

He didn’t have any words of consolation for Tony. Unbeknownst to the man, his sacrifice had counted for something. The recounting was worming its way into Loki’s head, shifting his perspective of the man.

Steve leaned back from the security feed, sighing to no one in particular. He scratched his nails against his scalp. Then he picked up his pen again, staring hopelessly at the red ink covered speech. He read the opening again, Loki and Tony in the corner of his eye.

## Chapter End Notes

I really hope this came across with all of the emotion that I want it to have without being too much. Please let me know how the read went for you and what you're thinking!

And thank you to all of you that have subscribed, commented, and left kudos!

## Chapter 13

The instant Steve walked in the kitchen Tony tensed. He hunched forward in his chair, over his coffee, wondering with miserable dread if he should just jump the gun and confront Steve first.

But Steve just walked casually past him, swinging open a cabinet door. He started making something behind Tony, and with every glass clink and faucet turn Tony grew more anxious.

It was better to go first, he decided.

“Sorry,” Tony blurted, turning back around over his chair. “For the other day.”

Steve studied him over his coffee, and with his lips concealed against the mug’s brim, Tony could not discern what Steve was thinking. Tony didn’t look too closely, imagining that Steve was using that parental air of silent judgment that his father had been so adept at. “I know you were just checking in,” Tony said, turning back towards the table and bracing himself for whatever Steve was going to say.

“It’s alright,” Steve said, sounding unbelievably chill. “I just wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

“I know,” Tony said.

Tony heard something fall into the sink behind him. “I’m not going to be around the tower today, but if you need something, call.” Steve glanced back at Tony before leaving. He felt better leaving the tower knowing that Tony had Loki there.

It wasn’t that Steve trusted Loki with Tony exactly. Steve was well aware of Loki’s inherent danger. It was just that any lingering concerns he had over Tony’s immediate safety had faded after seeing how Tony handled his argument with the god. He felt okay with leaving them alone now.

Steve’s school lectures had been taking a toll on him. While it helped to be able to talk about that past, and be with people that had actually lived it, it made him keenly aware of how strange his life was. It also made it harder to be around Tony’s suffering, because Howard’s memory had gotten louder with each stroll back down memory lane. Steve felt irrationally guilty.

Tony couldn’t believe his luck. There was no ‘be careful around Loki, he’s still dangerous’ lecture, no ‘you have to show your teammates respect’ mantra.

Tony stared dumbstruck at the door. He’d only apologized because he’d been too tired to endure a lecture.

Steve got halfway down the hall before he realized that he’d left his cellphone on the kitchen counter. He turned back. This time, Tony looked at him with something between suspicion and resignation. “Forgot my phone,” Steve said, smiling. Tony looked dressed for the day, but one of the strings on his hoodie was flipped over his back.

Steve paused at Tony’s chair, grabbing the string from behind Tony’s back and dropping it to the front. “What’re you going to do with yourself today?” He asked, tucking his phone into his back pocket.

“Uhm,” Tony said, his mind temporarily short circuited. He touched the string, uncomfortably aware of how dull he sounded. “I’ll probably work in the lab,” he said, blinking rapidly.

“There’re board games in the common room and some puzzles on Bruce’s floor if you’re looking for something to do with Loki,” Steve said, texting someone as he walked towards the door. “And Bruce has been keeping a chart of meals on the refrigerator in the game room. You should pull something from there if you want to bring Loki’s meal.”

“Thanks Papa Steve,” Tony quipped. Steve shot him a look over his shoulder with such sass that Tony was temporarily stunned.

“I’ll be back at five,” Steve said, leaving again.

Tony sat in the chair for a while, trying to reconstruct his image of Steve. Had he always been this way? Tony got up from the table, anxiously tugging at the strings on his hoodie before wandering over to the pantry. He ate half of a pop tart before leaving it with his bite marks and all of the crumbs on the table.

Without Steve, the residential parts of the tower were empty during the day. Tony took the elevator down to the living room and laid on the couch, absently watching daytime television. He felt more miserable watching the empty programming and ads. It only made him that much more aware that everyone else was gone and doing things.

So he got up and went to the balcony, but staring down at the city only made him feel at odds with the metropolis that was living and breathing all around him. He slunk back inside the tower, holing himself up in his bedroom.

It was only one o’clock. He was going to die of boredom.

He found himself in the common room, staring at the stack of board games. Tony pretended like he was just looking at them as a joke. He wasn’t going to play Chutes and Ladders with the god of mischief. He was going to avoid the god of mischief, because somehow, every time he was around Loki he found himself saying far more than he intended to. He found himself enjoying—no, he was just keeping an eye on the bastard, that was all.

He was only going to look at the refrigerator in the game room as a joke too.

But halfway through reading Bruce’s meal chart (he’d even tracked the amount of protein and sodium in everything, the overachiever) he stopped pretending. With a tiny hint of resignation he picked out the things listed under that day’s date, aware that yes, he felt a little happier now that he actually planned on visiting Loki.

Loki fucking grinned when Tony walked in the room, and shit, did Tony notice. He dropped his gaze down to the tupperware in his hands, trying to stifle his own grin. “I didn’t sneak you anything today,” he announced.

He set it on the counter. “I can’t have you turning into a spoiled brat,” Tony said.

“Mmm, I wouldn’t want to take your role, now would I?” Loki asked, striding over to the counter. He took a seat, expectantly waiting for Tony to join him.

Tony glanced at the barstool and then awkwardly sat on the bed instead, putting some distance between them. “Why don’t we split the title?” Tony asked.

“Consider it done,” Loki said, taking a bite of his sandwich. He watched Tony curiously as he chewed. There was only one bandaid on his finger today.

Tony pushed out a weak laugh. “I almost brought a board game with me. Steve’s suggestion.”

“I will take note of your mercy,” Loki said, wiping sauce from his mouth. “Could you perhaps take those with you today?” He asked, pointing to the rather sizable pile of books by the bed.

“No good?” Tony asked, picking one up.

“I am,” Loki said, clicking the tupperware closed, “looking for an answer, and for that, they were a disappointment.” He popped open a container and started on a custard, twirling the spoon in his fingers.

“What kind of answer?” Tony asked.

“Perhaps you’ve noticed that I am a tad less coherent than when we last met?” He asked, toying with the spoon.

“Not really,” Tony said sarcastically. Loki ignored him.

“If I had access to the libraries on Asgard, I might have a better understanding of what went wrong,” Loki said nonchalantly. He churned the custard, eyeing a spoonful closely before popping it into his mouth.

Tony tilted the book tightly gripped in his hands back and forth. “What went wrong?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Loki said playfully, pointing the spoon at him. Tony’s face went deadpan. Loki helped himself to another spoonful.

“If you gave me more than a wink I might be able to help you,” Tony said testily.

“I doubt it,” Loki said. “Part of this is my own doing.”

Loki read the confusion in Tony’s face with little satisfaction. “A spell went wrong,” Loki clarified. “Well,” he said, dragging the spoon along the bottom of his lip, “it went right, up until I was interfered with. It would have been fine otherwise, I am certain.”

Tony’s eyes followed the spoon as it trailed across Loki’s lip. “And are you going to tell me what that spell was?” Tony asked.

“No,” Loki said cheerfully. He scraped the custard from the dish, salaciously finishing off the custard without a sideways glance at Tony. He ignored the other containers, settling on just the bottled tea. Tony stayed quiet, hoping that Loki’s talkative mood would last.

Loki held up his bandaged finger as he took a long drink. “My magic is fighting itself. It’s made the healing process rather...slow.”

“Or at least I believe that is what is happening,” Loki said.

He lingered on the barstool, uncertain of what to do with Tony. An impish thought occurred to him. He decided to go with it, hoping to derive some amusement by the man’s reaction.

But Tony just sat there when Loki flung himself onto the bed, bouncing the mattress. He didn’t even fall off, as Loki had hoped. “Why’d you tell me that?” Tony asked.

“What?” Loki asked, leaning up from the bed.

“That you can’t heal quickly,” Tony said, his eyes fixing in on Loki. He saw a flash of anxiety in the god that was quickly covered by cold confidence.



“Do you threaten me?” Loki asked, sounding tired.

“No,” Tony said.

“Then I am unconcerned.” He sat up, grabbing one of the books from the floor. “Perhaps you should have brought a board game. Your company leaves much to be desired.” Tony was still for a moment. Then Loki felt Tony’s warm hand shove him.

“Yeah, you’re a real peach,” Tony said. The indignant look that crossed Loki’s face was otherworldly. Tony didn’t have time to regret it before Loki shoved him back, hard. “Hey watch it!” Tony jumped. “I don’t want you breaking your precious little finger.” Loki’s hand was halfway in the air before Tony said, “and I know it’s not that one. Fuck, do I regret teaching you that.”

Loki set his hand down innocently on the bed, pretending to be interested in a dust mote.

“I can see how you were a pain in the ass growing up,” Tony said.

“You should be grateful that magic is not at my disposal now, Stark,” Loki said. He leaned back against the headboard, curiously evaluating Tony as the man remained hulked over on the side of his bed. Tony could sense mischief coursing through the god, eager to have a target.

“How long do I have before it is?” Tony asked. Loki rolled over onto his side, facing away from Tony. “Sensitive subject?”

When Loki didn’t answer him he hesitated one second before stupidly poking the god in the side. Loki’s hand snaked around his wrist in an instant. He glared coldly, and Tony’s heart stirred to life, pumping just a little faster. Loki released his wrist, shoving it out from him. “Obviously,” he said.

Tony thought for a moment. “Maybe it’s in one of Jane’s books from Asgard?”

Something peculiar and angry crossed Loki’s face. “Jane has books from Asgard’s library?”

“Yeah,” Tony said.

“I need the healer’s text,” Loki said. “I doubt she has that.”

A few hours later Tony would discover that Loki was right, but for then he promised to find out. Loki stood from the bed, suddenly uncomfortable being so close to Tony. He wandered over to the counter, pretending to be interested in what he’d left inside the tupperware. He eyed the vegetables disdainfully.

“Where’d you put the remote?” Tony asked, leaning over the side of the bed. He began rifling through the sheets. Loki walked over swiftly, snatching it from the pillow it had been wedged under. He turned it on before handing the remote to Tony.

Tony flipped through a few channels before settling on a drama. “Have you seen this?” Tony asked, resting his feet up on the bed. He leaned back against the headboard, only too aware of how uncomfortable he felt. Loki lingered at the side of the bed, evidently uncertain of what to do with himself.

“No,” Loki said.

“It’s great,” Tony said. “If you’re into cop dramas.” He held his breath, watching Loki closely from the corner of his eye.

Loki stared at the television, also watching out the corner of his eye. If he didn't sit on the bed, then he'd be avoiding Tony, implying that there was something strange in sitting on the bed at all. It was his bed after all, wasn't it? Sitting on one of the barstools to watch would be too passive.

He sank down onto the bed as if it were nothing. "I am certain that I do not have to explain to you that we do not have 'cop dramas' on Asgard," Loki said.

"What do you have?" Tony asked flippantly. "Friday night beheadings?"

"Something like that," Loki said, grinning.

They settled into the show, sticking out the afternoon marathon. Though neither strayed from their half of the bed, they were both painfully aware of the invisible line down the center.

They were still there when Bruce came by with an evening meal. "Hey," Tony said, his voice breaking in the strain to sound casual.

"Hey," Bruce said calmly. "I hate that show," he said, using it as an excuse not to stay. He headed upstairs, where Clint was watching the same thing on the common room television.

Clint stared wide-eyed at him, daring him to speak. Bruce rolled his eyes, sliding down onto the couch. Clint was maniacal about silence during his shows. Bruce's phone buzzed.

Clint let out a huge passive-aggressive sigh. Bruce took out his phone, switching it to silent. *Everything okay?* Steve had texted him.

*Yes,* Bruce texted back.

## Chapter 14

Tony tugged open the game room fridge and reached in for the Thursday meal. His fingers latched onto the clear tupperware container, dragging it towards him.

He glanced down to see two meals inside. Thinking that it was a mistake, Tony swung the door closed, looking for Bruce's chart.

He found his name scrawled beside Loki's.

Tony stared down at the divided container.

He'd offered to take over meal delivery duty for Bruce. It freed up Bruce's schedule, and Tony was visiting anyway. For the past week, Tony had grown accustomed to showing up in Loki's room around noon and loitering there until the evening. They watched television together, or bickered over petty things, or Tony played on his tablet while Loki read.

It was a comfortable (if not peculiarly peaceful) arrangement.

Tony thought about what Loki would think of the extra meal as he wandered towards the god's room. He hadn't shared anything with Loki aside from the snuck beer.

"Is everybody decent?" Tony called out as he strode in past the security door. His lighthearted words echoed back at him. The room was empty.

His eyes darted across the little room, trying to convince his scrambling brain that there was some sliver of the tiny space that he had overlooked. Just as Tony was on the verge of panic, the bathroom door swung open. Loki came out pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. He blinked slowly with bloodshot eyes, staring at Tony.

Tony berated himself for forgetting about the small bathroom for a second before tossing the container on the counter and walking over to him. Loki waved him off, brushing past him and crawling into the bed. He pulled the covers over himself and turned his head sideways on the cool pillow, his slicked hair twisting across the pillow like a wet paintbrush. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Do you need something?" Tony asked anxiously. He wavered awkwardly at the side of the bed, wishing that he wasn't alone. Steve had stopped sticking around during the days, and Bruce wouldn't be coming back early anymore. There was no one to call for help upstairs.

Loki's hand lifted up from beneath the covers, his fingers twitching for a moment as if he was about to point to something. Then he dropped them against the bed. Tony kneeled down beside him.

"Loki?" He asked cautiously. No reply came.

"Jarvis?"

"He is consistent sir," Jarvis said gently.

Tony shifted anxiously on his feet, biting his lip. His dark eyes lingered over the pallid skin just inches from him. Loki's soft in and out breaths sounded like thunder in his ears. He glanced away

towards the ceiling, thinking of Jarvis. It had become a habit, not because he thought that Jarvis resided in the ceiling (as Loki often seemed to) but because he'd watched Loki do it so many times that it became natural.

Loki's fingers curved upwards on the bed like husks of curled paper. Tony stared at them, now completely bandage free. His eyes drifted slowly up the pale, veiny arm to the stitched hem of a gloomy gray t-shirt. Cautiously, his eyes darted back to the god's face to assert that yes, Loki was unconscious.

Apprehension constricted Tony. His muscles tensed tight as he stared at Loki's long white fingers. A palpitation thudded in his chest.

Tony closed his eyes.

He lifted his hand and slipped it in the open hand. Loki's fingers felt frigid. Tony eased his warm hand in, tucking his fingers in between Loki's own. He squeezed tightly, opening his eyes to stare down at the floor as he felt his warmth sucked away into the limp hand.

He had not asked again, but Tony had spent the entire week thinking about why Loki had told Tony his theory on his magic. Tony did not think it was like him to reveal that he could be injured easily. At first the admission aroused suspicion in Tony, but as the week trailed on, Tony came up with a different theory. Loki was scared and alone.

Tony squeezed Loki's hand, his eyes losing focus on the dark concrete floor.

Tony didn't know what he was doing. He'd been told that he was an egotist for so long that his self-image didn't exactly leave room for him painted with a compassionate, saintly halo. It was just that leaving terrified him. He glanced back morosely at Loki. He felt unbearably guilty.

And furious, suddenly. Why was he cleaning up Thor's problems, again? Why wasn't Thor here holding his little brother's hand instead? The thought sparked so deep an anger in Tony that it confused and surprised him.

Loki twitched, muttering something. Tony waited a long time for him to say something that made sense. Tony kept his hand there until his feet fell asleep and he sank to sit on the floor.

Loki felt blood dripping down his neck in the dream. Long claws hooked their jagged ends into the soft bones of his arching spine as detached voices whispered blood thirsty threats in his ears. He was terrified. But then, he felt something warm in his hand, and in the furthest reaches of his mind, in the tiny cragged little corners where his waking conscious stirred, he sensed the ghost of a hand slipping into his and felt a little less afraid.

Loki was still unconscious when Tony left feeling uncertain and uncomfortable. He flexed his hand, rubbing his thumb against his palm.

"Did you like the falafel?" Bruce asked when Tony walked into the kitchen.

Tony froze for a second, processing the question. It sounded so absurd beside his other thoughts. "Yeah," Tony lied, opening the fridge.

"I figured I'd just double meals this week to save you the trouble of making something," Bruce said. "But if you don't like something, it's okay."

“You don’t have to worry about it,” Tony said. “Loki couldn’t eat today anyway,” he said. “I’m guessing that we haven’t heard anything from Thor?”

“No,” Bruce said, turning around with interest when he heard the bitterness in Tony’s voice. “Why? Was Loki especially difficult today?”

“He was awake for oh...thirty seconds?” Tony said, sitting at the table with a beer. “I just want to know why Thor’s dragging this out.”

“Oh,” Bruce said. “I’m sure he has reasons,” he said thoughtfully. “There could be a million things happening to him right now. We have no idea. Thor has never given us any reason to doubt him, and he defended us without even knowing us. We owe him this. And he’s loyal. He’ll come through.”

Tony envied the way Bruce could say those words with confidence. He spun the beer’s bottle cap on the table, catching it beneath his thumb. “And if he doesn’t?”

Bruce smiled uncomfortably.

“This isn’t a containment facility,” Tony said.

“The alternative is SHIELD,” Bruce said. “And we’ve all agreed against that.”

“So then what?” Tony asked. “We just leave him here forever?”

Bruce shrugged, unwilling to commit to anything and wary of Tony’s mood. “He did try to conquer Earth,” Bruce said. “There are worse fates.”

Tony pulled a long sip from his beer. He exhaled loudly. “That was then,” Tony said. “This is now.” He resented the skepticism on Bruce’s face. “I hate being his captor and I hate seeing him like this,” Tony said. “I hate it.”

Bruce frowned, dropping his gaze to the table. He combed his fingers through his wavy hair. “I don’t know,” he said.

Tony sighed, rubbing his hands back against his face and closing his eyes. “I don’t either,” he said. “Where the hell is Steve?” He asked flatly.

“He’s made friends with some veterans, they went out for dinner,” Bruce said quickly. “You don’t have to take Loki’s meals down. I’ll keep doing it if you want. Steve’s not trying to saddle you with Loki...”

“I know,” Tony said. He hadn’t been paying attention. He hadn’t realized that Steve had something else going on. “That’s good,” Tony said weakly. “He can finally make some friends his age,” he said, smiling feebly.

“If Loki’s stressing you out, nobody’s making you—” Bruce said.

Guilt struck Tony at the worry in Bruce’s voice. “Loki’s not stressing me out. Thor’s stressing me out,” Tony said.

“I don’t know about Thor, but Natasha and Clint will be back tomorrow,” Bruce said. “If you want, they can drop in on Loki too.”

“That’s not good for Clint,” Tony said. “And Natasha...is Natasha.” A little grimace played across

his mouth at her name. He sat up from the table, taking his beer with him. "It's fine," he said. "I'm fine." Bruce stared down at the table. He did not want to argue, and he knew he'd never get anywhere arguing with Tony anyway.

Tony drifted off to his room. He finished off the beer and curled into bed with the stash of heavier alcohol he kept hidden in his nightstand. Loki had been doing so well during the week that Tony had forgotten that there were times like these too. Tony kicked his jeans off, pulling the covers over his boxers and a thin v-neck shirt.

His life was adrift without an anchor or a shoreline in sight, and he didn't know how it had happened. He was Tony Fucking Stark, and it shouldn't have been happening.

At the very least, he thought, could he not be imprisoning someone? Did his life really have to turn into that? After Afghanistan? And what the hell was going to happen to Loki after it all? Tony had had Rhodey, but Loki had...who exactly?

He didn't question why he was taking Loki's side now. He poured another drink.

Suddenly Tony didn't understand how he'd spent the past couple months worried for Thor. Not when Loki was like this. And the more he drank, the angrier he got about it. Thor had better be fucking sorry when he showed back up. Loki was just lying there broken, and Tony was a fucking accomplice in it.

He couldn't stand it. Tony kicked the covers from him, sitting up in the dark. He took a couple shots, dizzily lowering himself back onto the bed. If he could just forget about it, things would be different in the morning.

But he couldn't. He couldn't get the image of Loki lying on the bed out of his head. He couldn't stop thinking about the feel of his hand. How helpless he felt watching. How could he let that go on forever?

Tony stumbled out of bed.

It was late at night, but Loki was up. He figured that he would be up into the early morning hours, either reading or staring out at the city lights through the slated window. The door startled him when it opened.

Tony stood in the doorway, face flushed and anxious. He stared at Loki sitting up in bed, his legs propped up beneath the covers with a book in his lap. Tony gripped the doorframe for support.

"Go," he said.

Loki quietly lowered the book down onto the covers beside him. He slipped his dark hair back behind his ear slowly. "Go," Tony said louder. "Get out of here." His head swiveled and his knuckles went white against the door.

"Stark?" Loki asked cautiously. He slid from the bed, padding on bare feet towards the man.

"I've disabled Jarv," Tony said. "You can go anywhere," he said. Tony was breathing hard, and if Loki had known him better, he would've seen that he was on the edge of tears. When he got closer Tony retreated and stumbled into the elevator, closing the doors. Loki stopped at his door, just before the unlit security room. The floor lights on the elevator illuminated mechanically in the darkness.

Loki stayed still in the quiet. The security door was left open.

Tony crawled back into bed. He buried his face into his pillow, desperate not to be. He just needed a break. His hot breath blew back at him. His head spun. With his foot he sloppily tugged the covers back towards him.

“Stark?”

The fluorescent white hall light silhouetted Loki’s shadowed form in the doorframe. The door clicked shut with a soft thud as he closed it behind him. Slowly he treaded towards the bed, guided only by the electronic glow of Stark’s bedside clock.

Tony rolled over, sniffing loudly. “Loki?” He asked, sounding dazed. “What are you doing here?” He whispered. His head was spinning and he was certain that he was asleep and dreaming.

Loki’s lips pulled into a flat, somber line. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Stark’s bed was three times larger than his, he noted. He smoothed the soft covers beside him. Loki could not shake the feeling that he should not leave.

“You’re supposed to run away,” Tony said, his voice breaking between sorrow and frustration.

Loki pushed his hand back through his hair, closing his eyes. “You seemed unwell.”

Tony sat up too quickly and hit his dizzy head against the wall. “You worried about me?” He asked, rubbing what was sure to be a bump in the morning.

Loki twisted his fingers into the sheets, smiling unhappily. It was not an admission he was willing to make. “I am a wanted being in most, if not all, realms,” Loki said. “There are those that would happily pay a high price for my head.” He leaned forward, bracing his elbows against his thighs. “I have no magic to defend me,” he said a little calmer. “And who on this planet would treat me as I am here?” He said it so softly that it was nearly a whisper.

“I have nowhere to go,” he murmured too quietly for Tony to hear.

Tony’s hand thudded against the nightstand as he sought a light. It flooded the room and Loki blinked in the sudden light, undeniably real. Tony stared at him, unable to believe that he was sitting there, looking so...tangible.

He could see Loki’s face contort into worry, studying the work alcohol made of Tony’s weary body. Loki stayed still, anchored there.

Tony threw the covers away from the spot beside him, unable to keep his head held up any longer. He pulled the sheets up around his shoulders as he left the other side open. He closed his eyes. “You can stay here,” Tony said in a sleepy whisper.

He fell asleep with Loki sitting on the side of the bed. The god stared at the empty space beside Tony, the sad wrinkles and folds of overpriced sheets. Just a few months ago he had been sitting on the throne of Asgard. He had been the most powerful being in all of the realms, and now he was sitting on the bed of a mortal.

A few hours later the first rays of dawn woke Tony. He rolled over in bed, absently wondering if the empty space beside him was warm or not. Sleep returned to him quickly.

## Chapter 15

“Jarvis, tell me no one found out.” Tony stood in the middle of the bedroom in his boxers, resting his hands on his hips, anxiously waiting for an answer. “Jarv?”

“Oh. You *want* to talk to me now?” Jarvis asked.

Without patience Tony said, “I’m sorry about last night. Just tell me that Loki’s in his room and I’m not about to have one of the most miserable mornings of my life.”

“He’s in his room,” Jarvis said. “Unfortunately.” The word dripped with disdain.

“Jarv, do you want me to die at the hands of my teammates? You know Natasha is scary when she’s mad. And then who would take care of you?”

“I’m sure I’d manage,” Jarvis said.

“I’m going to dismantle you,” Tony said lightly, walking into his bathroom.

He turned on the shower, feeling a little like he’d dodged a death sentence. The hot water pounded against his head as he found a bottle of shampoo. He scrubbed his fingers through his hair, scraping his nails along his scalp.

He didn’t allow himself to think about how he’d felt last night or why he made the decisions he did. Instead, he started thinking about how he was going to fix things so that he wouldn’t be tempted to make it happen again.

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“Tony!” Darcy exclaimed as he walked into the lab, his eyes wandering along every detail. He had never been to Jane’s lab before. “Tell her that I’m right.”

“She’s right,” Tony said automatically, heading to the table that Jane was leaning over. She glared at Darcy with thin, tight lips. “About what?”

“Jane,” Darcy said musically, “got asked out by a guy that’s a grant researcher. We’ve done a couple projects with him. He wants to do dinner.” She said each word with relish.

“It’s not a big deal,” Jane said, staring down at the papers in front of her. She couldn’t understand a single thing that was written as her mind clouded with anxiety. “I’m not going to say yes.”

“Tell her she’s crazy,” Darcy said, brandishing an arm out. “Tell her it would be good for her to get out.”

Tony smiled with closed lips, raising his eyebrows at Darcy. “Seriously,” Darcy said.

“Is something going on?” Jane asked Tony, eager to change the subject. “We weren’t expecting you. Did you find something?”

“No,” Tony said, shaking his head. Jane had known as much from his sluggish steps. “I did want to talk to you about that, though.”



“About Thor,” Jane said.

“When, if, he comes back, I need you to promise me something.” Tony said. “I have a favor to ask.” Jane’s eyes softened a little, curious and kind.

“What is it?”

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Just before Tony was about to leave, Darcy ran into the bathroom. Tony took the opportunity to quietly ask Jane, “Is she right? Are you going on that date?”

Jane sighed, tucking her hands down into her shirt pockets. Her lips twisted down into the corner of her mouth. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what Loki said, and now Darcy,” she said drearily. “If Thor comes back, I’d be happy to see him. I’d want to see where things went again. But maybe,” Jane’s lips contorted unhappily, “I should be thinking more about right now.”

Tony nodded slowly. “Maybe I’ll go,” Jane said. She relaxed her shoulders. Her shirt seams tugged in protest as she stretched her pockets down. “If he does come back, I’ll still do what you asked,” she told Tony.

“Thanks,” he said.

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Tony didn’t get back to the tower until four, and by then he’d already missed Loki’s lunch. He grabbed two meals from the fridge, and then a stack, deciding that he would just stockpile them in Loki’s room.

Loki was sitting at the counter when Tony entered, but he made no attempt to greet Tony. Instead he kept his eyes glued on the television set, his apathetic face twitching with weakly suppressed emotion. The tupperware containers clattered as Tony set them on the counter and knocked a few over. “Hello,” he said pointedly.

Loki made a high, indifferent note in his throat, eyes locked on the TV. Tony decided to ignore him. He knelt down to the empty mini fridge beneath the counter and began grabbing containers from above him. “Sorry I forgot to drop off your lunch,” Tony said from the floor. He tossed a container inside the fridge. It hit the plastic wall with a hard thud.

“Steve brought one by,” Loki said. Tony could not see his face, and could not interpret much from his tone.

“Great,” Tony said, pulling the last container off the counter. He started rearranging the ones inside the fridge so that he wouldn’t have to get up. His breathing tightened.

He heard Loki crack open a container above him and rightly assumed that the god had snagged one while Tony had been taking them. Tony listened to the crunch of something (chips? carrots? celery?).

He wasn’t sure if there was something else that he was supposed to say. Were they going to act like last night hadn’t happened? It seemed that way, and Tony had no desire to correct it.

If he stayed hiding in the mini fridge though, it wasn't going to become any less awkward than it already was.

Tony rose to his feet, brushing his hands off on his jeans. "Alright then," Tony said. Loki's eyes were still locked on the television. "You've got enough food here for a week long apocalypse."

"Sit down," Loki said with all the enthusiasm of someone rattling off their address. Tony took a deep breath in his tight chest. So they weren't pretending then.

Only when Tony was seated did Loki take his attention from the TV. He muted it with a stiff press on the remote, then turned to face Tony. "You cannot," he said, "afford to be so sloppy."

Tony grinned incredulously, scoffing. "What?"

Loki smoothed his hair down with a flat, open hand. His mouth lifted in an unpleasant smile before he relaxed. "You cannot afford to release me. Your team does not trust me, and there stands no benefit for you in my release."

"I'm sorry?" Tony said mockingly. "Are you going to lecture me on letting your ass go? Shouldn't you be, oh I don't know, grateful?"

"If you release me it will endanger us both," Loki hissed angrily. He leaned in towards Tony, dropping his voice into a furious whisper. It was far more frightening than if he had just outright screamed. "I am in no position to defend myself, and neither are you. Do not make this anymore difficult than it already is."

Tony swallowed hard. Loki this close and this angry was hitting a sweet spot in him he'd rather it not. Tony turned stubborn. "I'm perfectly fine," he growled back.

Loki scoffed with a hard, salty hot breath that hit Tony in the face. Loki leaned back disgusted.

"I am," Tony insisted. Loki twisted back around and put his elbows up on the counter. He curved away from Tony in his seat. His hand dropped down and took the remote in a clenched, angry grip, turning the volume back on.

Tony stared at him. The sound of a chipper weather reporter twittered away.

"I cannot fathom why you think yourself capable of lying to me," Loki said with a low, sneering voice. One of his eyebrows twitched angrily down before he corrected it. "Nor why you suddenly feel the need to do so."

Tony bit down on his lip processing that. "Note to self," he then said glibly. "Loki has a thing for being prisoner." Instantly Loki's hand clenched around his wrist. The god stayed remarkably still as he kept his eyes set on the TV, feeling Tony anxiously squirm in his grip. "Okay, okay," Tony said appeasingly.

Loki's grip loosened just enough for Tony to knock his wrist against Loki's palm, but little else. "You were an accomplished individual when last we met," Loki said through gritted teeth. "Do you think I chose unwisely in selecting you for the demise of your teammates?"

His neck turned slowly towards Tony so that the man could look into his scathing eyes. "Had it not been for your device," he said, "I am certain you would have succeeded in my plans." Loki came just the tiniest, minutest bit closer. Tony wondered if the god could feel his thundering pulse or the heat curling through him as he gripped Tony's wrist tighter. "You will recover, Tony Stark, and until you do, you will not endanger me. I shall not fall for the delusion that you are incapable, nor

shall I fall for the delusion that you are fine,” he said, drawling acidly on the last word.

“Okay,” Tony said. His cheeks burned. From embarrassment, or anger, or something else. He didn’t know. Tony swung his wrist back towards himself. It jolted back and hit him when Loki let go. His stormy green eyes stayed fixed on Tony. “You’ve been spending too much time with Steve,” Tony said in a dismissive way that bordered on a whisper. He rubbed at his wrist, turning away to hide as much of his face as he could without it being obvious.

Loki glared at him and then pushed the tupperware container towards Tony with the back of his hand. Tony glanced at it, reeling from the speed that Loki’s emotions traveled at. Tepidly, Tony took a chip and crunched on it, wide-eyed and racing through his own thoughts as he watched Loki gaze with boredom at the television. “Is the Asgardian way of being really, really angry to reward people with food?” Tony asked.

Loki smirked without looking at Tony. “No,” he said.

“What is going on in that brain of yours?” Tony asked, doing his best to sound pleasantly foolish and playful. His heart still beat uncomfortably fast. “Because you are something else,” Tony said, crunching loudly on a chip.

“I wouldn’t want to overwhelm your sad mortal brain with despair and envy,” Loki said.

Tony grinned. He was dying to blurt out something like, “so are we cool now?” Reading Loki was infuriating in its difficulty. “I thought I was an accomplished individual,” Tony said cheekily.

“With an astronomical ego,” Loki said dryly.

“I guess we’re even there then,” Tony challenged him. Loki did not deny or correct him. Instead he glanced down at the tupperware, studying Tony from the corner of his eye. Once his worry had abated, Loki had been furious. Having taken a little of it out on Tony had soothed him enough to mildly relax.

A smile flickered on his mouth. “Mine seems far more deserved,” Loki said.

Tony shook his head adamantly. “I don’t think so,” he said. “See this tower? Me. All me.”

“This poor, poor city,” Loki said. “I was only trying to spare it from you.”

“Haha,” Tony said sarcastically, shoving Loki’s shoulder, knowing that he was either going to wind up pressed through that impossibly small window or assured that they were okay again. It was the later.

“Keep your greasy fingers to yourself,” Loki said, brushing off his shoulder.

“Fine,” Tony said, slamming his hand to the counter and dragging it along in one winding grease stain. Loki rolled his eyes.

“Charming,” he said.

“I thought so,” said Tony.

Loki flipped through the channels, settling back on a police drama. “I thought you said those were insipid and predictable,” Tony said.

Loki nodded his head to the side. “They are.” He set the remote down. “Will you be watching?”

Tony shifted on the rigid barstool, trying to make himself comfortable. “Yeah,” he said.

They sat in silence for a while. When the commercials came on Tony said, “I went to see Jane today.” Loki blinked slowly, waiting. “It seems like she’s going to take your advice.”

“In what way?” Loki asked serenely, watching an ad compare paper towel absorbency.

“She’s probably going to start seeing someone else,” Tony said. He leaned down against the counter. His back was starting to hurt.

At first Loki did nothing, thinking that over. It was better for Jane, he decided. Then a cruel smile slipped up onto his lips as he imagined Thor’s disappointment. “Why the change of heart?” He asked.

“A combination of you and Darcy, I think,” Tony said. “A lot of Darcy, probably.”

“Probably,” Loki said.

Silence settled back down between them.

At the end of the episode Tony got up to leave. He was sore from the barstool and still tired from the day before. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” Tony said. “Try not to cry yourself to sleep missing me in the meantime.”

“They would be tears of joy,” Loki said.

Tony grinned, matching Loki’s own as the god turned his attention back on the TV. When Tony got to the door, he stopped. His hand rested against the handle. “One more thing,” Tony said, his voice echoing off the door. “Did you mean what you said?” He turned slowly to look back over his shoulder.

“When?” Loki asked.

“About me,” Tony said, his brow creasing. He didn’t want to ask it outright. “And using me to take down the team.”

Loki tensed, drawing in a short breath through his nose. Stark looked like he needed the answer, and Loki despised his decision even before he’d made it. “I don’t ingratiate your ego for my amusement,” Loki said, answering the question as defensively as his pride would allow.

“Okay,” Tony said, turning back around. He felt lighter in the chest as he pushed through the door. Loki dropped his hands into his lap, flexing his foot. He twisted his fingers together, feeling powerless. He had no control over what happened to Tony when he left the room, and for the first time, it worried him.

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki sat at the foot of his bed, brushing his fingers back and forth along the black cotton comforter. His mouth dropped unhappily as he recalled staring down at a different bed with Tony's limp body in it. Loki had lingered by Tony's bedside a long time that night. The experience had been excruciating. Each moment had dragged on as Loki stayed immobilized, torn between leaving and staying.

He did not want to worry for Tony. It seemed beneath him to care about any of the Avengers, let alone the one that had in many ways, lead to his downfall. It was a liability, a weakness, an invitation to heartache. Loki didn't want to be standing at Tony's bedside, counting his breaths, feverishly watching that rough face of his twitch in restless sleep.

He also did not want to leave.

He knew though that staying would endanger Tony, and every minute that dragged on was only more time for his absence to be discovered. Once, he glanced at the side of the bed. Had Tony intended for him to take the open space? Loki brushed the thought from his mind with an unpleasant pang and walked to the door, pausing in the doorway. He glanced back over his shoulder, gazing somberly at Tony, checking with unhappy eyes for the steady rise and fall of the man's chest.

Loki's eyes lost focus as he stared down at his black comforter. He had to be here. He could not go anywhere else. Despair and anger and disappointment assaulted him all at once. He did not think it was possible for his life to fall any further.

It was just that Tony made it pleasant. Bearable. Good?

He dug his smooth fingers down into the cotton batting. That morning he had woken with Sif's voice ringing in his ears. "Do you think that Thor will still show you mercy?" She had whispered. "Even he has his limits."

The part that stung was that he had believed her. Had known well enough that he couldn't count on Thor's forgiveness this time. He'd lost his trust in Thor's mercy and it burned to realize that he still wanted it.

Loki tried to sew together the memory he'd deliberately torn. For the thousandth time he saw gunnir in his grip, radiating golden light. Recalled his heart beating wildly as foreboding washed over him, racing to conceal the one piece of information that could be held over all of their heads. That made it worth not killing him.

For the first time he had feared that Thor might actually carry out the threat.

Loki stared down at his empty hands. He needed to wrap them around gunnir again. He knew he'd placed the memory of Odin there, and he needed it back to undo whatever had gone wrong in the process. There was no doubt in his mind that once Thor had cleaned up all of the loose ends in Asgard, he would be back.

The door slid open.

Loki glanced up to see Steve in the doorway, carrying in a heavy shipping box. “What’s it this time?” Steve asked, smiling. He set the box on the counter with a loud thud.

“Hopefully something of interest,” Loki replied, striding over. He reached out a hand to tear off the packing tape but Steve pulled the box out of his reach and opened it himself with a pocket knife. Loki’s lips twitched as Steve slid the box back over to him.

Steve had that pleasant, serene look on his face as always. He slipped the knife into his back pocket. “How’re you doing today?”

Before Loki could answer the door flew open. “I said I could take it, Steve,” Tony announced, strutting into the room in pajama bottoms stained with coffee. He still had a mug in his hand. “I said I would, that comment was totally unnecessary—” He continued on, as if he had not just entered another room or conversation. He took one brief, sly glance at Loki before turning his attention back on Steve.

“Back in my day,” Steve began.

“You went uphill backwards barefoot in the snow, I know,” Tony said.

“We had to grind coffee with these spoons,” Steve said. “They had little bumps on the bottom, and it took hours, Tony. Just for one cup.” He was exaggerating just enough to draw sympathy. “We didn’t have a machine to stick it in. We had to use hard work and discipline.”

“That is a very sad story,” Tony said, “but what does it have to do with the mail?”

“Discipline,” Steve said. Loki grinned narrowly, recognizing the lilt in the Captain’s voice as a sign that he was up to something. Loki’s eyes narrowed in pleased anticipation of Tony’s reaction. “If you want something, you just click a button and it’s here. Have I ever told you about how we washed our clothes, Tony?”

Tony rolled his eyes back into his head. “No,” he said in protest.

“I think that maybe you need to grind coffee with a spoon so that you can appreciate all of your new technology,” Steve said.

“Or I could just give you all of the latest Stark products and you could forget about teaching me life lessons,” Tony offered.

“But then how would you learn discipline?” Steve asked. He turned to Loki. “This box has been sitting on the kitchen table for two days.”

“I’ll be sure to reprimand him accordingly,” Loki replied.

Tony went wide eyed at him. “Don’t take his side,” Tony said. “I’m the one that brings you food!”

“He forgot to the other day,” Loki confided in Steve. The pitiful look Loki was playing at would’ve made Tony laugh if it wasn’t being used against him. The Captain turned around with the best disappointed dad face that Tony had ever seen.

“Is this true?”

“Hell yeah it’s true,” Tony said immediately. “I mean—”

“I could have starved,” Loki said with a sad little snuffle.

Tony shot him a look before turning imploringly to Steve. "He's fine! Look at him!"

Steve shook his head sadly. "I think you're going to have to make coffee the way we did in my day," he said.

"I quite agree with the Captain," Loki said.

"You're both insane," Tony said.

A few hours later he would google coffee grinding spoons and realize that Steve was playing him. For now he was just indignant. "I am not having a sad pioneer reenactment day because I forgot to bring a box down here."

"And my lunch," Loki said, sniffing theatrically again. "I'm beginning to feel rather neglected."

"I'm beginning to feel rather neglected," Tony said mockingly. Steve saw Loki tense out of the corner of his eye.

"You," he said, pointing at Tony. "Go get dressed and look like a presentable human being."

"No," Tony said. He took a long, dramatic sip from his mug, watching with satisfaction as Steve's jaw set hard. Just as Steve was about to come back with something an alarm went off. At once the latent amusement slipped from their faces.

Tony turned around and hurried out the door, Steve right behind him. "Good thing you have a suit to hide that bed head of yours in," Steve said as he turned to close the door.

"Sorry that not all of our costumes can show everything," Loki heard Tony quip back as the door sealed shut.

The absence of their playful chatter sucked the life right back out of the room. Loki leaned gloomily down against the counter, wondering if he'd get a chance to see them again that day.

He read through books, and watched television, and was almost relieved when a bout of nausea bubbled up and overcame him. The room was a dull prison that days drifted through whenever he was alone. Loki crawled into bed, knocking books onto the floor, and tumbled between memories where he saw his mother and father standing taller than him until late in the evening.

Loki watched television for an hour, hoping that Steve or preferably, Tony, would come back in and break the monotony.

He gave up and turned on a small bedside lamp. A book with a soft cover met his fingers as they fished around on the floor. Loki leaned back up over the bed and fell deep into reading, not noticing when the door slowly opened a long time later.

The room was pitch black aside from the light slipping down Loki's shoulder. Tony padded over slowly to the bed. "Hey."

Loki startled when he heard the voice. He looked up to see Tony standing there, tense and reserved like he had something to say. Shadows curved over Tony's angles and it took Loki a moment to recognize that the shadow across Tony's right cheekbone wasn't a shadow at all but a dark purple bruise. Tony saw his eyes drift to the spot and widen. "It's not a big deal," Tony said. He sat down on the edge of the bed, crossing one leg over his knee. "I took a pretty nice hit from some super villain wannabe. Honestly, I think we was just using it as an excuse to meet us," Tony said jokingly. "We told him no pictures."

Loki leaned forward, resting his weight against one arm. His face was stiff and mask-like as he moved in closer to Tony. His hand hesitated too briefly for Tony to recognize before his long thumb slipped over Tony's chin, bending Tony's head towards him to get a better look in the light.

Tony's heart thudded. Loki's astute eyes did not meet his as he looked clinically at Tony's bruise, tilting the man's head back and forth. It was only the softness in the way that his fingers grazed against Tony's skin that gave his concern away. It was only Tony's silence giving his fluster away. Tony tried not to move his face, dropping his bright gaze to Loki's curved shoulder.

"Does it hurt?" Loki asked, depriving Tony's skin of contact as his hand slipped away.

"I've had worse," Tony said. Loki's pale hand stood out like a ghost against the black sheets. Tony's eyes traced the tiny little scars across his fingers where the bandaids had once been. "I'll get over it," he said, noticing Loki's long fingernails with a tiny prick at the base of his spine.

"It does not seem too severe," Loki said, leaning off his spot and back against the headboard. He sensed that Tony wanted something. Sympathy, perhaps. He slid his foot in closer to Tony on the bed, betraying none of his thoughts on his face.

He did not want Tony to leave. He wanted Tony to talk with him and make the little room less bleak.

Whenever Tony was gone he could reprimand himself for caring, but when Tony was beside him it was impossible.

"So, uh," Tony said, his voice echoing against the concrete floor. He glanced over at Loki and then pretended that pulling himself over to sit on top of the covers was completely casual. If his leg rested against Loki's leg beneath the covers, well, he pretended that he hadn't noticed. It wasn't like Loki pulled away. "You know a lot about me," Tony said, staring into the darkness. "What's your story?" His face twisted into an uncomfortable grin as he choked over words that he wanted to sound casual. "Other than worldly domination? Do you have someone pining over you back in Asgard?"

Loki's face faltered. It was a strange question to be asking, was it not? Stark was turned from him, and he did not want to risk more than a sideways glance. "No," Loki said, his voice wavering between defensiveness and condescension. Perhaps Stark meant to mock him.

"That's surprising," Tony said in a tone that Loki could not decipher.

"Thor cast a long shadow," Loki said, slipping his fingers down beneath the comforter.

"Yeah," Tony said indifferently, "but—" The look on Loki's face silenced him. "I mean," Tony said, staring at the dim outline of the countertop in the distance, "You—it's not like you're—never mind, stupid question." Tony said. He was going to back out of it, but then he couldn't let it go. "Thor's told some insane stories. I know Asgard's not like a church or something. Fandral could probably put me to shame," Tony said. "I guess I sort of pictured you as, never mind."

Loki stayed quiet, rubbing his thumbs together beneath the comforter. "You don't have to tell me," Tony said, feeling bad for asking. Loki didn't want to tell him. It was disappointing that Loki would keep him at a distance, but it wasn't something that he could be angry about.

Loki's brows came together above distant eyes. He had left the pursuit of lovers behind in favor of chasing the throne. It had not been a conscious decision, or one that he had given much thought. Now it was little more than a trivial, lurking background memory. It was probably a meaningless



question from Stark's careless lips, meant to provoke him into sharing some detail on Asgard.

Tony stayed still and stiff on the bed, like he was trying to blend in. Alright, so Loki didn't want to divulge but that also meant he was available, wasn't he? That was *good*. Tony's body jolted. The tremor bounced the bed. No, he thought, he had just asked, he wasn't asking like a personal question. It was a question for a friend, it was... fuck. Tony dropped his head back, staring hopelessly at the ceiling. "Do you not feel well?" Loki asked suspiciously beside him.

Tony couldn't tell if Loki had put the pieces together, and he was a smart fucker, so it seemed likely. "Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought," Tony fibbed. He bit down hard on his bottom lip. It sounded like bullshit.

Loki didn't notice or didn't care. He rolled over on his side, taking Tony's chin in his hands again. Alright, Tony thought, closing his eyes. Be normal, he thought. Those soft fingers were sliding against his stubbled skin, and if they slipped down to take a pulse they'd know something was wrong. "It really hurts," Tony lied. "My head's spinning. I should—" Loki's hand tilted his head closer to the light.

He felt gentle fingers slide just barely over the surface of his skin where the bruise had formed. It was barely a touch, a faint, whispering pressure above his aching skin, but it felt like sun against skin. Loki's voice came back with raw despair. "I can't heal it," he said. The fresh reminder of his failed magic sunk deep into the pit of his stomach.

"That's okay," Tony said. The fingers had receded. When he opened his eyes Loki was still staring at him, his astute eyes evaluating Tony in a way that made him feel transparent. "I'm just sort of dizzy," Tony said. God, Loki's inky hair caught the light in just the right way. This was dangerous. He needed to leave before he started admiring other things. "I should go upstairs."

Loki felt none of Stark's urgency. Stark just looked frazzled and frightened, and Loki knew he made bad decisions when he looked that way. "Jarvis," Loki demanded.

"Yes, your snootiness?"

"Your ineptitude strikes yet again," Loki said. "Tony is unwell. Bring down Banner."

"No, don't wake him up," Tony said. He stumbled up from the bed. "I'll be fine."

Loki glared at him skeptically. "Jarvis, do not wake him up," Tony said.

"Yes sir."

"Jarvis," Loki said louder.

"Don't," Tony said.

"Then at least stay here so that I may monitor you," Loki said. Tony shifted the weight on his feet. "Either go to Banner or stay here," Loki commanded him. That voice, Tony thought. He wanted to obey that demanding voice. Fuck, that was bad, wasn't it? Why the hell did this have to be happening?

More than a little hating himself, Tony sat back down on the bed. Loki grabbed the TV remote and turned on reruns, returning to reading his book as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world. Tony sank down into the bed, wishing that it would swallow him whole.

He envied the bastard, he really did. He had no idea as he sat there, reading his book on

cephalopods or economic trends or whatever the hell it was he read.

With a twist in his stomach Tony realized that the pillow around his face smelled like Loki, and that was the worst. That was the absolute worst because it soothed Tony in a way that sunk all the way to his toes, and he was Tony Fucking Stark and this was Loki Fucking Loki and this just should not be happening.

Lawyers and blenders and dust mops and colleges chattered away at Tony between glimpses of a show where Tony could predict every punchline. It was like his skin was buzzing, rattling with an anxiety that was going to give him away like a ticking bomb. Tony tried to recall footage of Loki carving out a man's eyeball, the feral glint in his sharp white teeth as the deed was done. He was bat-shit crazy, wasn't he? There was no way that Tony was developing *feelings*.

He stuffed that thought as far down as it would go. Nothing to see here, nothing at all.

He heard a peculiar squeak behind him and turned to see that Loki had fallen asleep. The book had dropped down into his lap and he laid with his head slack against the headboard, his lips parted unflatteringly. Another squeaky breath escaped him.

Tony stood from the bed as quickly as his stiff legs would allow. He took one brave look at Loki, tightly balling his fists together. If he stayed here, Loki was going to start drooling, and if that wasn't a turn off, Tony didn't know what was.

Unless...

No, no, Tony had just hit his head and this really was that, and yes he'd had a SHIELD medical check in that assured him nothing was broken and he was perfectly fine, but the best medical team in the world must have missed something because he and Loki were just friends, *friends*. Oh God.

Tony had been down this road a million times before and he knew the signs.

Tony locked the security door behind him and practically jumped into his own bed, where Loki walked through his dreams all night, just beyond reach.

## Chapter End Notes

Hello! I hope you enjoyed it. I'm trying to improve on conveying emotion so please let me know how it read for you and thank you as always! The next update will be soon because I have irresponsible priorities and can't stop writing this.

## Chapter 17

“You look weird,” Clint said, eyeing Tony over the top of the can he was sipping out of.

Tony walked past Clint and tugged open the kitchen refrigerator. “It’s a good thing you became a secret agent and not a therapist or a teacher or something.”

“Are you saying I have bad people skills?” Clint shot back at him.

“Yes,” Tony said dully. He cracked open a bottle as Clint scowled at him.

“You do look kind of weird,” Rhodey said from the table, not bothering to look up from his paper.

“What’re you doing reading print media in my tower?” Tony challenged him. “How dare you. There’s a perfectly good tablet right there.”

“Uh-huh,” Rhodey said. He’d showed up in the morning as naturally as if he’d been there all week. Clint was seated right beside him, watching Tony critically. He didn’t have the same laser-like glare as Natasha though, so Tony wasn’t as worried.

“I didn’t sleep,” Tony said, chugging the bottle.

“No, it’s more like a—” Clint gestured around his face absurdly, hopelessly trying to land on the right word. Rhodey turned around to help him with a definite look of amusement.

“It’s a glow,” Rhodey said after a moment’s deliberation. “Are you pregnant?” He turned to Clint. “I think he’s pregnant,” he said assuredly.

Tony rolled his eyes dramatically.

“Yeah, that’s what it is,” Clint said, nodding like a professor. “Definitely.”

“Don’t call me when the baby comes and you need a last minute babysitter,” Rhodey said.

“And don’t look at me for that,” Clint said.

“You know that’s what it would be,” Rhodey said to Clint. “Constant calls. What do I do? How do I change a diaper? Can you do it for me?”

“At three in the morning,” Clint agreed.

“If I didn’t feel so sorry for your obvious lack of sex ed I’d be upset right now,” Tony said. Rhodey and Clint just cracked up laughing. With a sigh and a defeated eye roll Tony left, hiding his grin as he did.

He knew they were kidding, but he still stopped in the bathroom to look closely at himself. They couldn’t actually tell that something was going on with him, right? Not that Tony thought that he was pregnant, but he wasn’t glowing, right? He leaned in to the mirror a little closer, as if maybe, just maybe he expected a light to be slipping out of a crack in his skin that he hadn’t seen.

No, he was losing it. They had just been joking around, and it wasn’t like he was infatuated with anyone, no, of course not, so there was nothing for him to be glowing about at all. He did still have that nasty bruise, though.

He had spent the entire morning repairing the helmet so that he'd be just in time for—well, it wasn't like he was making sure he had enough time or anything, it just worked out that way...

Steve was coming out of Loki's security door when Tony got downstairs. "He's asleep," Steve said.

"Asleep as in passed out or not awake yet?" Tony asked, looking past Steve's shoulder to the steel door.

"As in he just passed out," Steve said. He rested a hand on Tony's shoulder as he walked by him. "Come on, let's go get breakfast."

"It's noon," Tony protested. "What did he say before he passed out?"

Steve stopped, and Tony could see the back of his neatly shaved neck straighten just perceptibly before he turned around. "He's fine," Steve said as if the question amused him. "Breakfast for lunch then," he said, resting one hand against his hip, watching Tony's eyes dart back towards the door.

"Yeah, okay," Tony said, realizing too late to hide it that Steve found his behavior odd. He grinned, shrugging it off. "Breakfast."

Steve chose a quiet hotel restaurant where the waitress knew him. She always got him a private booth towards the back where he wouldn't be bothered, and without fail, thanked him again for his service during the invasion.

"Don't," Tony said, holding up his hand before she could thank him. "You're good."

"Right," she said, bashfully picking up her pen. "So, then...same as usual, Steve?" Tony raised an eyebrow at Steve. He just nodded his head at the waitress, avoiding Tony's stare. "And for you, Mr. Stark?"

He picked something at random and let her take the menus from the table. Tony shook his head, grinning to himself. "We're just friends," Steve said, pretending to be interested in the laminated dessert menu hanging by a tiny wooden plaque at the table.

"Whatever you say," Tony said. He tapped his fingertips against the table. "So," he said, glancing out over the identical booths and tables, trying to appear disinterested, "What did Loki know this morning? Any evil plans I should be aware of?"

Steve shook his head, accepting a cup of coffee from the waitress. Beth, by her name tag. She filled Tony's cup as well before disappearing. "Just..." Steve's voice wandered off, and Tony's head swarmed with impatience. "He's doing better, it seems." Steve sipped his coffee, gazing out the window.

Tony nodded his head, irritated that Steve didn't elaborate. Could he ask more questions, or would it be too obvious?

"Great," Tony said.

Steve set his mug down. "What about you? How is your time spent with him going?"

Tony rubbed at his nose, glancing over at the other tables. Beth was chatting with a group of tourists. "Good," Tony said.

"I'm sure he appreciates it," Steve said.

"Yeah, well, we'd never know, would we?" Tony asked, lounging his arm against the back of the booth and avoiding Steve's eyes.

"He asked about your bruise," Steve said helpfully.

Tony didn't know if he wanted to scream at Steve for holding that information back or grab his pristinely pressed shirt collar and drag every detail out of him. He took a heavy sip of his coffee. He was not supposed to care that much. "Yeah?" Tony asked indifferently, scalding himself as he took a huge drink to hide his discomfort.

"I told him you were fine," Steve said absently. He had spotted Beth coming with their food, and didn't really seem to notice Tony choke on his coffee. Tony was wiping his face with a napkin when Beth got there. She slid a plate over in front of him and started chatting with Steve about the auditions she had been to as she poured him a second cup of coffee.

Tony cursed her timing as he stuck a fork into his eggs, waiting for her to leave. When the smile had faded from Steve's lips he turned back to Tony. "I was uh, thinking that maybe I would ask him if he could take a look at some of the intel files we have on other villains. I figured he might know them, and it would give him something to do."

"I can ask him," Tony said. He stared down at his plate, acting like he had an interest in the greasy hash browns there. "I'll take the files down to him."

"You don't have to do everything," Steve said. "I know you didn't want to get involved with him, and I sort of forced you into it." He tapped his fork against the plate. "So I don't want to keep adding things for you to do."

"Really, it's fine," Tony said. He kept his eyes trained on his plate, and Steve felt a tiny grin tug at his lips. Tony wanted to help now. That was great. A little bit of hope seeped into Steve's chest. He had always meant what he said to Tony.

"Alright," Steve said, trying not to sound too eager. He had a fear of coming on too strong and scaring Tony off completely just when things were going so well. They sat in silence for a while, kept company by the sounds of the forks tinkling against the plates and mugs set down on the table.

Tony realized that he was counting down the minutes until he would be back in the tower again, ready to saunter downstairs with the files in hand. Actually, he realized, he had three different scenarios of how Loki would react in his head. One scenario was particularly hopeful, but it kept stopping just as... Tony set the fork down on the plate with a heavy hand.

"What's wrong?" Steve asked.

"Nothing," Tony said, blinking. He contorted his face into something agreeable.

Steve opened his mouth and then closed it with a tiny frown, dropping his gaze to the table. "I'd like it if you would tell me," he said quietly.

A sharp headache stung in the front of Tony's head. He pushed his hand to his temple. He wished that it was Rhodey sitting with him instead. It was easier to be open with Rhodey. "Please," Steve said quietly.

Tony's expressive eyes vanished behind a slow blink. He didn't know if Steve would understand,

but the way he asked made it difficult for Tony to say no. “When I think of starting a relationship with someone again,” Tony said quietly, cryptically. He rubbed at his chin, struggling to tug out the words. “I just—,” Tony shrugged, grinning closed lipped with half of his mouth, his mirthless stare set on Steve.

Steve wetted his bottom lip, picking his words with care. “Do you have someone in mind?”

“No,” Tony lied. Steve nodded, none the wiser. “It’s just, when I think about it, I can’t stop thinking about what Pepper said to me.”

The air felt cold in Steve’s mouth. He didn’t know what Pepper had said to Tony. Tony had barely told him anything. Everything he knew was mostly from other people. Terror hit him. If he said the wrong thing, Tony might not tell him anything again. “Someone,” Steve said cautiously, the words like lead on his tongue, “will see in you what I do and the rest of the team does and...you’ll find somebody else, Tony. Somebody that appreciates you as you are.” When he looked at Tony he saw Howard’s little boy staring back at him, and his heart ached. If he could have, he would’ve said anything to remedy what was bothering Tony. He knew it was not that simple.

Tony rubbed at his head. He didn’t want to be having this conversation at all. He just felt guilty for how hard Steve was trying all the time. “And if she was right?” The words fell lifelessly from his dry lips.

“She wasn’t,” Steve said. He glanced up and caught Beth’s eye. He signaled for the check. “You’re,” he said, “you deserve someone new.” He grabbed his wallet from his back pocket and took out a wad of cash.

Tony watched him hand over the bills and tell Beth to keep the change. “When someone new does come,” Steve said, standing up nervously from the booth, “don’t hesitate because you think you’re not good enough. That’s all I can really tell you.”

Tony slid out slowly to follow him. He drifted back into his own thoughts. Before any of the scenarios he could think of with Loki played out, Pepper always appeared in them, telling Tony it couldn’t happen. That he was too selfish for it to happen. Tony wanted to kick himself. Why did this have to be difficult? Why did it have to be happening at all?

Steve drove them in the longest, most winding route home, quietly opening the way for Tony to talk in private. After a while Tony filled it with empty chatter, watching the clock. He had been trying since morning to get to Loki’s room. He could sense that Steve was anxious, and concerned as ever. “Can we go back? I have some work I need to get done.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. When they got to the tower Tony went inside without waiting for him. Steve went up to his room, and fretted for a while. Then he decided to see where Tony was, but when he asked, Jarvis said he was with Loki. Steve started a fresh canvas.

Loki had just woken up when Tony appeared, carrying a stack of files in his hands. With open dread Loki eyed the files. “Thought you might like some new reading,” Tony said, setting them onto the counter with a thick thud.

Loki silently crossed the room and flipped open one of the manilla folders, scanning the lines of text. “We were hoping that you might have inside information on them.”

“No,” Loki said, dropping the file with a loud smack. He walked around Tony and bent down to

take a container from the fridge.

“Any of the others?” Tony asked.

Loki ate as he leisurely read the files. “No,” he said with each one, sliding it away. Tony was visibly disappointed as he gathered them back up. Loki seemed more interested in what he was eating than anything else.

Tony picked up the files and turned as if he was about to go to the door. “Will you not be staying?” Loki asked behind him.

“You seem busy,” Tony said. Loki laughed.

“With what,” he said.

Tony was fumbling for an answer as he turned back around. “Your company is appreciated, Stark,” Loki said. “Mostly.”

“Mostly?” Tony said, seizing on it. “Mostly?” He said, his voice rising playfully.

“Mostly,” Loki repeated. He turned his head to the side, smiling a little as the gears in his head began to turn. “Perhaps I should take a look at that mark on your face. You seem unlike yourself today.”

Tony took a hesitant step forward. “It’s fine,” he said.

Loki stared at him with expectant patience. He curtly curled his finger towards himself, beckoning Tony. With a stubborn sigh Tony strode over. He had to bend down for Loki, who refused to stand. “It’s fine,” Tony insisted. Loki’s hand slipped beneath his chin, and in the perfect picture of clinical inspection Loki examined the murky mix of purple and yellow.

Tony closed his eyes. His heart was beating faster. He’d tried telling himself that he’d come into this room and everything would be normal and he wouldn’t feel anything. But as the day had worn on, and he’d found himself angry that he wasn’t in this room, he knew it wasn’t true. “Hmm,” Loki hummed quietly, tilting Tony’s head.

He watched Tony’s eyelids closely as he softly curled his fingers together, brushing them against the soft skin under the man’s chin. There was nothing he could do for Tony, and he knew it.

Tony listened to the soft rustle of Loki’s shirt as he shifted his arm, adjusting Tony’s head. Maybe Steve had said something right. Maybe the ghost of Pepper was wrong.

He felt better with those fingers there.

Loki moved to take them away. He stared at his wrist. Tony’s hand had closed around it. The man’s rough hand pressed gently against his hand. “Just keep it there for a moment,” Tony said in a mutter, his eyes opening just enough that Loki could make out the conflicted rings of mahogany beneath his dark eyelashes.

The request sent confusion curling into Loki’s thoughts. At once he felt a pang of aching sympathy for Tony. He enjoyed holding the man’s face in his hand. But for Tony to actually want that? It was...confusing.

No one had wanted anything from him in a long time. Perhaps Stark really was hurt, then. To seek comfort from him.

Still, he didn't want to take his hand away.

The sound of Tony's heavy breath broke his thoughts. "Sorry," Tony said quietly, pulling his head back. He rubbed at his cheek, incapable of looking at Loki as his face burned hot.

Loki's gaze dropped down to the limp hand at Tony's side.

They heard only heartbeats and the dull hum of appliances.

"Perhaps that show is on," Loki said. His voice was unnaturally raw and unguarded. Tony breathed in deeply through his nose. Loki stood from the stool, barely brushing against Tony as he walked over to the bedside and grabbed the remote. He sat down on his bed, and flipped the television on, desperate to have something to do. The actor's voices filled the room. "Sit here Stark," Loki said. "You are unwell," he declared, taking the lead for both of them.

Tony glanced over at the bed. He knew he was making a decision that he couldn't take back. Either he accepted that something was going on with him and Loki and followed it wherever it would lead, or he played it safe and left it alone.

Loki stared straight ahead, zealously watching Tony from the corner of his eye. Tony turned. Then he began to walk slowly towards the bed. He laid down, sinking his head deep into the downy pillow. Loki stayed stiff with his back against the headboard.

Tony was remarkably quiet as he watched the show. He didn't even laugh at the jokes. Loki watched him in his peripheral vision the entire time, his mind nothing but question after question. Why did he care what happened to Stark? Why did Stark seem to care what happened to him? What was Stark's motivation, exactly? And why did it occupy him so?

When Tony's eyes closed Loki stayed very still. He thought that Stark was still awake. But when his mouth slipped open and he began to snore in the middle of the third show, Loki realized that he was wrong.

He slid down slowly, carefully, until he was just barely propped up on his arms. His hair fell across his face as he stared down at Stark's sleeping body. He would've killed this man without a second thought years ago. It seemed like a shame now.

He leaned up, running both hands across his head as he let out a heavy sigh. He wasn't sure that he liked the changes in himself. Loki glanced over at the security door. Then the television. He turned it off. "Jarvis, lights," he muttered. For once the monstrosity did not argue.

Loki turned over on his side, as far away from Tony as he could be without falling off of the bed. He stared pensively at the wall. For a couple hours he laid there, acutely aware of Stark's shallow breathing and the chill of the room. He was unaware of when sleep claimed him.



## Chapter 18

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Something vile with rotting flesh and dragging claws was chasing him. He tried to run. He couldn't. He was paralyzed by the Other. Long, spectral screams rang out in the distance. The creature would find him by the scent of his own blood as it gushed down his arm. He grasped at the wound and, in spite of himself, began to scream.

Tony woke to the sound. He jolted up in absolute darkness. There was not a single light. He had no idea where he was and something was moving, twisting beside him, breathing loudly and then that horrible crying sound started again and Tony's heart hammered in his frantic chest as he scrambled in the dark. He touched skin. He startled, terrified, releasing the cold flesh. Then he remembered where he was.

He fumbled forward, trying to find Loki's arm and wake him. "Jarvis," Tony barked. As the lights came up, Tony found himself leaning down over Loki's face. The god's eyes were pinched shut as he writhed in the dream. "Hey," Tony said, blinking desperately to adjust to the sudden change in light. "Wake up!"

Loki screamed again. The hollow sound sank into Tony's ears and sent shivers down his spine. He leaned down, grabbing Loki's shoulders. It wasn't a good move, but in his panic it seemed like the only one to make. "Wake up, you're having a nightmare!"

Loki opened his eyes, gasping for breath. At first he saw nothing in the bright light. Then his eyes adjusted. Stark's face was looking down over him, his brown eyes wide and alert. Loki pulled in short, choppy breaths through his open mouth, his eyelids fluttering in shock. "It's too bright," he muttered. Vaguely he was aware that Stark was holding him down, but instead of trapping him, it felt like Stark was stopping him from floating away into the nightmare.

"Dim the lights, Jarvis," Tony said, watching Loki's disoriented green eyes settle back on him again. Tony's breathing was frantic too. The adrenaline of the sudden wake up began to ebb and he relaxed a bit, dropping his head ever so slightly. Loki could feel Tony's warm breath drifting against his cold skin.

He was going to say something but shivered instead. The dream was horrifically lucid. Loki could still smell the metallic scent of his own blood mixing with the putrid creature's.

Tony was staring at him with a strange look in his eye. Had he said something odd? He was too rattled by the dream to think of anything.

Loki's dark eyes had no pretense to call their own. They were unnaturally open, unguarded. His hair twisted in curls around his pillow case, draping from pale temples and sharp angles made smooth by his reclining. Was it possible for him to look fragile? Tony hesitated. Loki felt the weight lifted from one of his shoulders. Tony's hand slipped against his face as he smoothed a lock of hair down. Loki's eyes flickered closed for a moment.

When he reopened them, Tony had stopped looking at him. Tony was only looking down at his shoulder. The fear of the nightmare still rattled through his mind. Tony's face was somber, locked in thought. "Are you okay?" Tony asked quietly. He met Loki's eye with an unnatural hint of shyness.

Loki sighed in response, closing his eyes completely. “Yes,” he said. He felt Tony’s weight shift on his shoulder. The room was quiet and safe, and though he still smelt blood and sickness, he didn’t feel alone. Tony’s breath was warm and close. Too close. Warm lips met the corner of his mouth before he could think further.

They were soft, tepid, frightened lips that were unsure of themselves. Tony leaned away, his breath receding. “Sorry,” he whispered. “I should’ve...”

Tony felt fingers at the back of his neck. Long, strong fingers that pulled his head back down to warm lips that parted, a hot tongue that slid along just right. Tony moaned, forgetting to hold himself up. He pressed himself closer to that mouth. The desire he’d been trying to hold back and deny crushed him. For a moment, he stopped hesitating and stopped thinking.

Tony felt good. Loki was surprised and stiff, but Tony’s thin, warm body pining him down was nice. Reassuring. He dropped his hand down to Tony’s back, letting out a sigh when Tony’s frantic lips suddenly parted. Loki drummed his fingertips against the man’s soft cotton t-shirt, grinning as he looked up into the man’s eyes.

Tony sat back. Loki’s hand slid from his back as Tony leaned over into the other side of the bed. His face burned like he’d never kissed before, and he wished that the room was pitch black instead of dim so that Loki wouldn’t see his embarrassment. “That was unexpected, Stark,” Loki said quietly.

“Was it,” Tony said, staring down at the comforter. Loki brushed his hand against Tony’s arm, then rested it there. The touch was searing. Tony longed to throw himself into it. He was astounding himself with his own self-restraint. And his uncertainty, and all the thoughts that were coming with it, but he was pretending that wasn’t happening.

Loki stared up at the ceiling, dropping his hand to the bed, waiting to see what Tony would do next. Maybe Stark would leave. Maybe Stark hadn’t meant anything by it. Maybe it was a cultural difference and Loki would have to lie about his eager response. He would rather spite himself than tell Stark that he’d liked it if Stark hadn’t meant anything by it. He didn’t want to make the next move. He didn’t want to take the risk and be rejected.

“Was it...” Tony’s stomach churned as he struggled for the words. He felt like a teenager again and it was excruciating. “Okay?” He glanced over and Loki was looking at him with those peculiarly soft eyes again.

“Yes,” Loki replied in a whisper, his eyebrows knitting together.

“Good,” Tony said. The sheets rustled as he leaned over to take Loki’s mouth again. Loki’s mouth was receptive, but not as eager as Tony would’ve liked. He wasn’t domineering like Tony expected. Tony slid his fingers into Loki’s hair and was rewarded with a moan.

Loki shivered beneath Tony in a way that made Tony uneasy. “I should...I should go,” Tony said, pulling away. Loki shivered again. “I...probably shouldn’t be found spending the night in here.”

Loki pulled the covers in closer before darting his eyes in Tony’s direction. The man had hunched over on the side of the bed, flushed and uneasy. Loki’s heart was racing hard, and he trembled again.

“You okay?” Tony asked very, very quietly.

“It’s just...just the dream wearing off,” Loki said, rolling over onto his side. He didn’t want Tony

to see him like this at all. He jumped when Tony's hand rested against his side. Tony bit down on his lip until it screamed in pain.

The bed creaked as Tony leaned over him, brushed against his shoulder, and grabbed the television remote. "I'll stay," he said. "If it helps." He flipped on the television, watching Loki closely.

Loki flipped his hand back, sending the covers straight into Stark. "You can stay here, if you..." His lips flinched. He dropped his gaze down to the floor instead.

Tony was exhausted. His stomach was sour with the tumbling whirlwind of waking in sheer terror and the emotional upheaval that followed. His lips tasted like Loki, and he was struggling between collapsing on the bed and running his fingers under that gray shirt of Loki's the way he so desperately wanted to. Loki shook again. An instinct to protect him abruptly flared in Tony.

It wasn't the right timing. He grabbed the covers, pulling himself down under them. He glanced over at Loki. The god was stiffly watching the wall again. The bed shook with his tremor. "Don't kill me for this, okay?" Tony said, delicately setting his hand against Loki's waist.

God, he smelled nice. Loki leaned back into him. He was too drained and weary to listen to the part of him that was seething with wounded pride. He wasn't supposed to be this close to a mortal. It was supposed to be beneath him. Especially since Stark was a mortal that he had gone to war against. But Tony's presence was a balm that couldn't be matched. He didn't argue against Tony leaning in, or his pillow sinking with Tony's added weight.

Instead, he drifted back to sleep with a tiny, subconscious smile on his mouth.

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Tony woke up with his arm around Loki's waist. He blinked, then pulled away and dropped himself over on the bed beside Loki. He pinched his arm. He pinched his arm harder. Awake. Real. Definitely real.

That meant last night was real too. He sat up in the bed, rubbing his hands against his cheeks. Light was coming in from the tiny slated window. It was morning. Mid-morning? Late? He couldn't tell. Tony hopped out of the bed, remarkably not waking Loki.

Loki's bed head was turned from Tony. He had curled up in the corner of the bed. A heat pooled in Tony's stomach the moment the memory of last night hit him. Plan. Plan, Tony, plan. He was terrible at those.

He was good at saving his ass though, so he opened the security door and stepped into the guarded room. "Jarvis," Tony said. "I have an ultra secret mission for you. Are you ready for it?"

"Yes?" Jarvis piped up, interested.

"You get to make sure that no one finds out about Loki and me, alright? If someone wants to come in there and I'm there, you warn me. You keep it a secret. You make diversions and you lock people out and you make sure that no one gets suspicious, alright?"

"Suspicious of what, Sir?" Jarvis asked.

"Exactly," Tony said. He reopened the door, intent on tweaking Jarvis's programming later that morning. Right after he'd wrapped his head around what had happened between him and Loki.

Loki was still asleep, and Tony circled the counter twice, torn between the urge to wake him and let him be. What if he woke with a vengeance? What if Tony had been wrong? What if he was right? Tony's heart beat faster and faster. He stopped and opened the fridge. It was empty. Tony stood back up. Loki was still asleep. Of course he was still asleep, he'd be asleep until he woke up. Why? Couldn't he just get up now? Tony resumed pacing around the counter.

Alright. He would take a shower and stop thinking about that deft mouth and all the things he'd like it to do because that was turning into the only thing that he could think about. And he would make damn well sure that Jarvis put up the best security that he could manage. Tony paused at the security door, staring back over his shoulder as if Loki would wake up just in time to tell him where they stood. With resignation he left.

He was a little elated as he rode up the elevator. He had to keep trying to temper the rising optimism he felt. Giddy was not supposed to be a word that could describe Tony Stark.

## Chapter End Notes

((*\*whispers\* Not to worry, their arrogant, bastardly sides will be back.* ))

## Chapter 19

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki woke up cold and alone.

The covers lay crumpled at his ankles. He pushed himself up with one arm, rubbing at his eye with his free hand. A single sharp green eye surveyed the slated window, then the empty room. With a sigh he sat up, rubbing his face.

Stark had been too warm. That was why the covers had been pushed away. Loki let out a loud sigh, then swung himself up out of the bed. He padded over to the small bathroom and shut himself inside, turning the water on high. Steam flooded the tiny space.

He grinned, dragging his lazy finger across the shower glass, writing his name in runes. He didn't expect that Stark would return that day. He didn't expect that Stark would return at all. He would just have the memory of last night to keep him company until Thor showed up or something unexpected occurred, or even less likely, his magic returned.

He wrote his name, grinning a little smile, stupidly enjoying the motion of wet skin on glass.

Stark had stayed the night with him, and he was too sleepy still for the prideful side of him to wake. It had been nice not to fall asleep alone.

Stark wasn't there now, and Loki assumed it was only because the Iron Man's senses had come to him. He couldn't be seen with the enemy. Surely he had realized that in the morning. He was not an idiot.

Loki closed his eyes and combed his fingers through his wet hair. He stayed in the shower for a long time, delaying the inevitable days alone in monotony that were to come. As long as he was in the shower, last night was still real, and not that far gone yet.

When Loki finally stepped out, the water pooled around his feet, soaking the white bathmat. His pajamas were lumped up on the rim of the sink. He ignored them, grabbing the door handle, and tossing the door open with a dull click. "That explains the jump in the water bill," Stark's voice greeted him.

"Woah, okay, I didn't know we were there yet but if we are it's cool—" Tony's voice tumbled over itself as his heat flushed his face.

"Turn around, Stark," Loki said irritably, suppressing the smirk on his face from Stark's return.

"What? It's not like you haven't taken your clothes off in front of me before—" Tony said.

"That was different," Loki said.

"Why?" Tony said instantly. "Why?" He asked again, sounding lewdly interested.

"Because I care now," Loki said through his teeth, making no attempt to shield himself as he walked bare past Tony. He shot the man a look and Tony tripped over himself trying to turn back around obediently towards the bar. Loki swallowed down a laugh.

He threw open the closet, taking his precious time selecting an outfit. Tony's chatter filled in the gaps. "So, uh, Jarvis is fully upgraded," Tony said. His throat was dry. He swallowed hard. "Anything that happens in here with us won't make the security feed."

"Perhaps you could adjust his personality as well," Loki said, slipping on Midgardian undergarments. He had grown used to them.

Tony got louder as he got indignant. "Hey, I spent a lot of time and money on Jarvis's personality," Tony said. Loki hummed judgmentally. The hangers squealed as he shoved clothes aside in the closet. "It's past noon but I was thinking pancakes, maybe? Or bear claws? They're not actual bear claws," Tony said, anticipating the peculiar pinched look Loki's face got when Midgardian nonsense was mentioned. "They're almond pastries. But sometimes they're filled with butter pecan or cream cheese or..." He leaned back against the bar counter, eager to turn around. "Does that sound good?"

"Are you making it, Stark?" Loki asked.

"If by making you mean buying, sure," Tony said.

"What a relief," Loki said. He adjusted his shirt collar.

"Hey," Tony chided him. "You don't know if I can cook or not. And I feel a hell of a lot more confident assuming that you don't know how to cook, Mr. Grew Up In a Palace."

"As if your upbringing was dissimilar in that regard," Loki said. Suddenly he was standing at Tony's side. The man's retort was knocked from his mind as Loki's hand came to rest on his shoulder.

He was positively stunning. Sure, his hair was still dripping wet, but that only added a debonair charm to the sophisticated ensemble. Tony envied the prim press of Loki's shirt, greedily keeping all of that skin to itself. "Bear claw?" Tony asked weakly.

Loki closed his eyes, hiding the roll behind his lids. "If it pleases you."

"There are other things that would please me," Tony said suggestively, hope lighting up his face. He wasn't sure how Loki would react to him, and this was going a hundred times better than anything he could've imagined.

"I am certain," Loki said with a devious smirk.

"We could skip breakfast," Tony said, wishing desperately that Loki would lean down a little closer to him.

"Mmhmm," Loki said. His heart skipped uncomfortably. He released Stark's arm. He was enjoying this too much. He wasn't supposed to. It was supposed to be beneath him. "Back to neglecting your prisoners, I see."

Tony's face dropped. He swallowed hard. "I'll go get it," he said. He rushed to the door so quickly that guilt overcame Loki. He hadn't meant for his own defensiveness to strike Stark so harshly.

"Stark," Loki called after him.

"Yeah?" Tony asked, smiling light heartedly when he turned around. It seemed like nothing had happened, but Loki knew better.

“Don’t make me wait.”

“Sure thing,” Tony said, vanishing behind the door. Loki sat down on the barstool, lacing his fingers together. He squeezed his hands, running his thumb across his palm. He was pleased that Tony had returned.

He was uncertain, though. Loki rose and walked to the bed, straightening it for the first time in weeks. The only time it looked new was when Bruce or Steve appeared, insisting on taking the sheets along with the laundry. He tugged at the corners, annoyed that he couldn’t just smooth it with a wave of his hand.

At least he felt well now. He probably wouldn’t have issues for a few hours, then. He lined the pillows up and then tugged the sliding closet door closed all the way. That was it. That was all there was to do in the little room. He made a huffy sigh.

He glanced down at the pile of books. He was still straightening them when Tony returned.

“I’ve got bear claws and cronuts, have you heard of those? It’s a croissant and a donut,” Tony said, carrying a huge paper bag in his arms as he balanced a cardboard drink carrier in the other.

“They’re great,” he said, glancing over at Loki crouching over the books. Tony was a little bit breathless, because hey, he had run, and sped, and maybe abused some Iron Man privileges to make sure that he got back here fast because he wasn’t really sure how much Loki was joking.

Loki strode towards the counter where Tony’s hunched shoulders were tearing the bag apart. “I didn’t know what kind of cronut you’d want so I got vanilla and raspberry and chocolate and cannoli filling... you know, whatever, just shove them in your mouth,” Tony said. He laughed.

Loki comfortably took a coffee from the carrier and popped open the plastic lid. It smelt of caramel and salt. He snapped the lid back on approvingly. Tony stole a sideways glance at the way his lips wrapped around the plastic brim.

Tony took one of the coffees for himself. That meant there were two others, a cinnamon vanilla and a hazelnut. Happily, Tony had the only one that wasn’t flavored.

He followed Loki’s lead, calmly sipping his coffee. Loki snatched one of the cronuts and twirled it around his finger, examining it. When he took a bite Tony could tell that he was pleased, though he said nothing.

Tony kicked his foot against the barstool, balancing his shoe against the metal bar. “No more nightmares, Sleeping Beauty?” Tony asked lightly, watching Loki from the corner of his eye.

“None,” he said primly, taking a sip of his coffee. He met air and set the cup down, taking another one from the tray. Hazelnut.

“Good,” Tony said. He took a half-hearted bite of a bear claw. “You looked alright this morning when I woke up, so I—”

“Avoided suspicion,” Loki cut him off. Tony’s face flinched. He stared down at the countertop.

“Well, that and I wanted to do a few things,” Tony said. “Like reprogramming Jarvis.” He smiled uncertainly at Loki. He’d spent the entire morning wavering between hiding away and returning. Loki didn’t feel like someone he could cast away when things got awkward or boring. Loki felt important, and it frightened Tony a little. He didn’t think that Loki would think he was important like that. Tony had spent a good deal of the morning thinking about the incident and the breakup’s aftermath as well. It had not done him any favors. “Okay?” Tony asked.

Loki began his second cronut, nodding his head to the side. “Be careful not to arouse suspicion in your teammates,” Loki said diplomatically.

Tony turned his head away, staring grimly across the room. “Don’t worry about that,” Tony said soberly. He was unsure of what Loki wanted. The warning sounded so formal to him. “Those are pretty good, right?” He asked brightly, nodding his head towards the cronuts.

“They are acceptable,” Loki said, starting on his third.

“They’re better than acceptable,” Tony said, grinning playfully.

Loki frowned skeptically. He chewed slowly, pretending to consider when really he was only buying time. “Whatever,” Tony declared, taking a heavy drink of his coffee. He set it down on the counter. He poked at the pastry in front of him.

Loki set his coffee down, sighing. His breath smelt like caramel, hazelnut, and sugar. Tony could smell it acutely. “Wanna start where we left off?” Tony asked softly, staring at the counter. He glanced up to see Loki watching him closely. He grinned.

Though Loki was making a show of pretending that he was in control, his tight, tense posture betrayed him. “Must I spell it out for you, Stark?” Loki asked.

“Not when you put it like that,” Tony muttered, leaning in. Loki’s mouth was eager but graceless. Tony took it slow, savoring the taste of caramel curling down inside him. He wasn’t going to be able to eat anything caramel without getting turned on for months. He slipped his hand behind Loki’s ear, bending him into a more appealing angle.

Tony slid on the barstool and dropped his hands to Loki’s shoulders to catch himself. He laughed softly, glancing up at Loki’s flushed face and fervent eyes. “The bed’s more comfortable,” Tony said, grabbing his hand.

He felt more than a little princely leading Loki along.

Loki cautiously let Tony slide down over him on the bed. His heart thudded in his chest as his hands closed around the man’s back. Tony muttered something that he didn’t hear. Then Tony’s lips were at his ear, sliding over the sensitive skin there, and he was closing his eyes, hardly aware of the sigh escaping his lips. Tony’s fingers kneaded against his tight shoulders as he muttered little nothings that made Loki think that Stark truly was in love with his own voice.

Then Tony’s lips were at his neck, and as cold air met his mouth again, Loki shuddered. Tony stopped abruptly. He glanced questioningly at Loki, who half-opened his eyes. Something thoughtful crossed Tony’s face. Then he was back at Loki’s neck, letting his tongue do as it pleased. He popped the obtrusive button on Loki’s collar, the pretentious idiot. He glanced lustily upwards, disappearing from Loki’s vision again as his teeth met skin in the hollow of Loki’s throat. Loki’s back arched upwards as he groaned, twisting beneath Tony’s weight.

Tony chuckled deep in his throat, his eyes bright. Loki dropped his head to the mattress, breathing harder. Slowly, he was aware that Tony was amused. “What?” He demanded in a half whisper.

Tony grinned, licking his swollen lip. He glanced away, thinking something over. “Are you...” Tony bit down and flinched when it was too tender. He leaned down and pressed his lips along Loki’s jawline. Loki felt Tony’s fingers knead against his shoulder again. He could feel Tony’s lips pull back in a smile against his skin.

“Sir, Captain Rogers will be attempting to access the room in approximately one minute. The



elevator is on its way,” Jarvis said.

Tony leaned up, groaning. “Thanks for the heads up Jarv,” he said. Loki stared up at Tony. The man had braced his hands on either side of Loki’s head. “You should probably pretend to be asleep,” Tony said.

“And why is that,” Loki demanded. “I can deceive Rogers just as well as you. Better, I should think.” He sat up, trying to push Tony aside, but the man just comfortably wrapped his arms across Loki’s shoulders.

“Because,” Tony said with more than a little pride, “you look pretty flustered.” He leaned in and stole a wet kiss from Loki’s disgruntled mouth before standing back up. “I,” Tony said, “am going to go hide myself behind that counter for however long it takes this awkwardness to end.” He slid away from Loki and back off the bed with a charming smirk. Then he walked uncomfortably to the bar, watching Loki from behind the counter with satisfaction as he leaned down as casually as he could manage.

Loki glared at him from the bed, his hair bedraggled against his face. “I would really pretend to be asleep,” Tony gloated.

Loki’s face protested haughtily.

“Go look in the mirror then if you don’t believe me,” Tony said, gesturing towards the bathroom door.

“Thirty seconds, sir.”

Loki glanced at Tony, and then in the showiest display of disdain that Tony had ever seen, Loki rushed towards the bathroom. “I wouldn’t be seen coming out of there like that either,” Tony called behind him. A shit-eating grin was pasted all over his face as he waited outside the door.

Loki met his flushed face and ruined hair in the mirror with a treacherous look of dread. Tony was right. Loki wasn’t sure whether he was darkly pleased or embarrassed or annoyed or all of the above. He experimentally slipped his fingers against the pink skin along his neck. “Five seconds,” Jarvis announced.

Loki shot Tony a seething stare before throwing himself into the bed. He wrapped the covers over his shoulders just as the door opened.

“Oh,” he heard Steve say. “Is Loki asleep?” He asked softly.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “He just passed out. I was cleaning up breakfast.”

Steve whispered something to Tony and Loki couldn’t make out any of the brief conversation. The second he heard the door close he sat back up. Tony grinned, toothy and amused, before he strode back over to the bed. Loki threw the covers aside violently.

“Calm down, we’ll get there,” Tony said, smirking.

“Stark,” Loki warned him.

“What?” Tony asked, gently pressing Loki’s back down towards the bed again. Loki glared, his eyes flicking stubbornly to the side as he let Tony move him. Tony waited, but when he said nothing, he returned his lips to Loki’s obstinate mouth. Loki’s lips parted without prodding, and Tony forgot himself in his own desire for a while.

Loki was pliable and uncertain but not unpleasant. Tony felt a wave of dread at the thought that Loki wasn't into him. But, just before that thought could really sink its teeth into Tony, Loki groaned in a way that sent Tony over the edge. Tony made a hum deep in his throat, sliding his tongue along Loki's collarbone. The god's fingers slipped against his sharp shoulder blades. Tony glanced up at Loki, at his lips parted in desire, his ordinarily pallid face flushed and ruddy. Tony sat up again, smirking. There was true amusement in his eyes.

Loki was trying to read him when Tony bent down by his ear. "You're up for this, right?" He whispered. Loki's hands pulled him in closer, pressing into the spaces between his ribs.

"Yes, Stark," Loki said impatiently.

Loki felt Tony's chest vibrate as he laughed. Tony leaned down and then that demanding mouth was parting his lips again. Nope. Loki's mouth still felt unsettled and rough. Tony leaned back with a smirk, looking away from Loki. "What?" Loki demanded. Tony shook his head slowly, grinning harder.

He just turned back and smoothed Loki's hair down against the pillow with a peculiar spark in his eye.

His fingers helped themselves to two more buttons, baring Loki's chest. Loki watched Stark's head sink down to his chest and made a needy moan as Stark's tongue teased a hard peak there. The sound made the growing heat in Tony's groin unbearable. He rocked down in an attempt to move, groaning in spite of himself. The smell of Loki, the odd caramel taste in his throat, the unsure, fevered way Loki was looking at him—it was all overwhelming. Tony leaned down and hid his face against Loki's chest. He tugged in a short breath through his open mouth and was overcome when skin touched his lips. He hadn't felt like this in forever. Sure, he had had fun. But this was... he bit down on his bottom lip, using the pain to distract himself from the sinking feeling that he was about to come in his pants like a...he bit down harder. It was fucking unfair, that's what it was.

Loki's fingers slid through his hair, and he could feel the god's heart pumping hard in his chest. Tony leaned up, careful not to move his hips or reward the terrible ache there. Stark's eyes were jet black and open, and finally, finally Stark's face looked more flushed than his own. Loki smirked triumphantly. "It is you that shall have to pretend to be asleep now."

Tony scoffed. The hard breath thumping in his chest sent a jolt through his body that made him writhe uncomfortably. "Listen here you little shit," he said through gritted teeth, trying not to appreciate how obscenely debauched Loki looked still wearing a god damn shirt, all wrinkled and pulled around his flushed throat and chest. And did he have to look so fucking smug? It should be illegal to look that smug. "You're lucky that—oh shit, now I'm thinking about Steve, I should not be thinking about Steve right now, thanks a lot."

Loki's grin faltered for a moment. "I don't need scarring Steve on my conscious," Tony said.

"I hardly think that the Captain would be scarred," Loki said. Tony looked as though he would disagree. Loki made a skeptical hum. He wanted Tony to stop talking. He had made his decision a few minutes ago. Perhaps mortals were supposed to be beneath him, but he could make an exception, could he not? In any case, he was adept at lying to himself. He could still pretend that he was above it. Would Stark stop staring at him, already?

Tony had to stop staring at him. He was trying to think about dead puppies, or poorly designed software, or Shield meetings but none of it was working when Loki was in every last one of his senses. He eased himself away as gently as he could. He stood at the foot of the bed. He didn't

want it to go down like this. He didn't want Loki to think less of him, and why was that even a thought that was going through his head? Tony covered his mouth with his hand, pulling a breath in through his nose.

Loki sat up, cold air greeting his exposed shoulders and chest. He raised a suspicious eyebrow at Tony. "Stark."

"I don't want to overwhelm you," Tony said playfully, leaning his chest in towards Loki before the god could argue. He pressed a kiss to Loki's forehead, his heart beating wildly. Simple things felt daring with Loki. "I'm going to keep you waiting," he murmured provocatively.

"Stark," Loki protested.

Tony bent down and kissed him. "Mmm-mm," Tony muttered reproachfully. Loki's fingers wrapped possessively around his waist. Tony jumped. "Be patient," he said, grabbing Loki's wrists, tottering on the brink. Shield meetings. Shield meetings. Shield meetings.

Loki sighed irritably. The only thing keeping him from fully expressing his impatience was the fear of scaring Tony off. "I told you not to keep me waiting," Loki said. In reply Stark slipped his hand beneath his chin, tilting his head up.

"I have plans for you," he said. "Just not today."

Loki's face still burned after Tony had closed the door.

He stared at the door for a while before lying back down against the bed. He shook with a tiny shiver. A mischievous smile crept into the corner of his mouth.

## Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear what you're thinking of them.

## Chapter 20

### Chapter Notes

I actually woke myself up thinking I needed to edit this and finish it, so without further ado, enjoy!

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“Alright,” Rhodey said, as if he’d lost his patience. Tony looked up from his drink questioningly, taken back by the sudden shift in tone. “Are you going to give me a name or something?”

“For what?” Tony asked. Had he not been paying attention? They were just talking about work, right?

“Come on man,” Rhodey said. “You look different. Something’s definitely going on. Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to pry it out of you?”

Tony wiped his face with a napkin, though there was no need. He gave Rhodey a dismissive glance, twisting his martini glass by the brim. “I’ve been watching a lot of Dr. Phil reruns, I guess.”

Rhodey leaned skeptically back, glancing around at an invisible audience in disbelief before setting his gaze squarely on Tony. “You’re not...you’re not back together with Pepper, are you?”

“No,” Tony said, throwing his head back and downing the rest of the martini glass. Rhodey relaxed at that information. Tony glanced around the empty bar, setting his glass down with a loud clink. They were the only ones in the place, aside from a bar tender that kept checking her watch.

She noticed Tony’s empty glass. “Ten minutes ’til closing time,” she said.

“That’s plenty of time,” Tony said. She avoided looking at him as she irritably rattled the cocktail shaker. He took the refilled glass with a broad smile.

“It’s got to be something,” Rhodey said. “Don’t leave me in the dark like this.”

Tony licked his lips. In any other circumstance he would tell Rhodey. But Loki was a delicate situation. Rhodey could relocate Loki. He had the resources. He’d do it too, in Tony’s best interest, but he’d do it all the same.

“I’ve just had a lot of nights out,” Tony said, winding his way around the truth. “Met a few people.”

Rhodey took a sip of his full beer. “That’s good,” he said. “Anyone...special, then?”

Tony shook his head, reading the bottle labels behind the bar. “It’s strange,” Tony said honestly. “I get feelings of guilt when I’m with other people, even though we’re not together anymore.” His voice was distant and detached. “It’s not fair.”

“It takes time,” Rhodey said, putting his hand on Tony’s shoulder in reassurance. He glanced at the clock and the anxious bartender, then released Tony to dig in his back pocket for his wallet.

"I've got it," Tony said.

"No you don't," Rhodey said, holding his card up. The bartender caught his eye and took it before Tony could argue. "How're things going with Loki, by the way?" He asked, watching her slide the card down through the register's reader.

"Oh, you know, same as ever," Tony said, drowning himself in the martini.

"Is he still sick?" Rhodey asked lightly, signing his name on the receipt the bartender brought.

Tony glanced down at his reflection in what was left of the martini. "He's getting better," Tony said quietly.

"Is that a good thing?" Rhodey said thoughtlessly, sort of kidding as he stood from the barstool. The words stung Tony. He shifted his head noncommittally, not wanting to betray Loki and agree, but not wanting to correct Rhodey and start something either. Loki was still the god that smashed up New York and endangered his friends's lives to Rhodey. He wouldn't trust Loki just because Tony did. "Oh, you should see this video that's been going around Shield this week," Rhodey said, taking out his phone. He pulled up a video of a puppy as they headed towards the door.

"Shield sits around watching puppy videos," Tony said deadpan as the bartender bolted the door behind them. They stepped out onto the street.

"Yeah," Rhodey said, unlocking the car. "I'm not even consulting for them right now and I still get this sort of stuff." He cracked up as the puppy fell asleep. Tony smirked indulgently, opening the passenger side door. Rhodey was staying at the tower that night.

When they got in, Tony wandered back up to his room. He tossed his watch on the dresser, pausing to stare at the shirt he'd left rumpled there. It was the same one he'd been wearing that afternoon when he'd seen Loki.

He stripped down and crawled into bed, staring up at the ceiling. He rolled over onto his stomach. Then his back. Then his stomach.

He'd meant what he said to Rhodey. It was strange. He still thought about Pepper sometimes. He still felt angry at her occasionally. He felt guilt. He felt bitter. He'd also felt certain that no one was really going to want him again, and Loki was proving him wrong. Loki was good for him.

He twisted in the sheets and rolled over onto his back again, warm at the thought of Loki gasping beneath him. He didn't want to screw it up. He didn't want to make the wrong step and spend a month bouncing between expensive bars and strangers's apartments in Manhattan trying to forget. Or worse.

Tony laughed, dropping his forearm over his eyes. Oh, Loki. With his stupid ruddy face and breathy little sighs. Tony grinned fondly, flipping through scenarios in his mind. He had to get it right.

He twirled his pointer finger in circles against the comforter, thinking.

There was a very long list of things he'd like to do. But maybe, the first time, he should savor the occasion and not rush things. The other stuff could wait.

He rolled back over onto his stomach, laughing to himself as he replayed the memory. He was going to enjoy this.

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Loki woke at four in the morning and didn't fall back asleep. He paced the room, jittery with nebulous anticipation. He didn't know when Stark would show up (or *if* he would show up. Maybe he'd had second thoughts. That would explain the swift departure).

He began clicking his nails together as he paced, eyes darting back and forth with his alert mind's wanderings. What did Stark's plans mean, precisely?

His mind suggested Stark's throaty hum, and Loki felt a burn crawl up his neck. He drummed his fingers against the countertop, and then glanced at the bathroom door.

He leaned in close to the mirror. First his eyes wandered to his hair. He'd slept on it, but that didn't mean much to him. He combed his fingertips in short, upward digging motions against his scalp. He leaned back, staring hopelessly at the little volume that added. He sighed at his reflection, tilting his head. His hair was naturally curly when left to its own devices, and without magic he had no means to change that. Clint had made a passing comment about missing his hair gel on the first day he'd arrived, but Loki had barely been capable of paying attention to that, let alone understanding it. Now he wondered how these Midgardians styled their hair.

Tony's hair had a brittle sort of texture to it, but it was still soft.

No, he would not ask Tony.

He glanced begrudgingly up towards the ceiling.

"Jarvis," he said, leaning his head out of the bathroom. "Tell me what mortal methods are in place to account for one's hair."

There was a perceptible pause in Jarvis's programming. "You mean you want more shampoo?" Jarvis asked skeptically.

Shampoo. No, he had learned that. There was shampoo and conditioner and body gel and body soap and body scrub (it seemed excessive, but Loki had taken pity on Steve that first week and agreeably nodded his head as the captain had tried to explain it all to him, not really sure whether Loki understood and slightly embarrassed to be explaining it at all). Under the sink there was deodorizing body spray and deodorant and six different kinds of lotion (with bemusing names like Midnight Musk) and shave gel and razors (which had only appeared after all of the others) and a brightly colored basket with things like effervescent foot soak and a pedicure kit that was shaped like a seashell. Loki highly suspected that it had been a gift to someone at some point.

"No," Loki told Jarvis. "I wish for my hair to be straight."

"I can order a hair straightener for you," Jarvis suggested.

Loki was slightly embarrassed to be asking at all, not that he'd admit it. "That will be acceptable," he said haughtily, having no mental image whatsoever of what that would look like. He slammed the bathroom door and pretended like he hadn't just done that.

He ignored his flippant hair and instead studied his skin in the mirror. He looked tired. He felt a sudden, terrible, immense longing for home.

After a while spent critically looking his face over, he wandered back into his room, where Jarvis

informed him that the time was five thirty. Loki paced for a while and then slouched over the counter from a barstool.

He didn't think he could take waiting for Tony. He turned on the television and watched reruns until the sun crept inside the room.

Sometime after breakfast, a wave of nausea hit. Disappointment swept over him as he crawled into the bed, images of claws seeping into his vision.

He woke with a jolt around noon, hearing the security door open.

Hopefully, he hurried to sit up, his head spinning. He was unable to hide his displeasure when he saw that it was Bruce. "Tony had a meeting he couldn't get out of so it's me today," Bruce said, obviously uncomfortable. He never had gotten onto friendly terms with Loki. "And he had a couple of errands to run?" Bruce awkwardly set the tupperware container down on the counter. "He'll be back this evening," Bruce said, hiding his face as he pinched his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Loki dropped himself back into the bed with a loud sigh the moment the door shut. He stared disdainfully at the ceiling. His head was still spinning. He returned to sleep.

Loki woke up in late afternoon, feeling blissfully normal. He slunk over to his lunch like a cat, systematically working his way through a neatly partitioned assortment of food. He sat at the counter a while, curling his toes, wondering and trying not to wonder when (if?) Tony would show up.

The bathroom door clicked shut behind him and was quickly followed by the sound of every item in the cabinet getting dragged out.

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Loki was lounging on the neatly made bed, dressed more like he was going to a formal dinner than lying about all day when Tony found him.

"Hey," Tony said softly, his face lighting up as he closed the security door. Loki could smell a faint flicker of something appealing curl towards him. The cologne Tony had chosen was a blend of black pepper, bergamot, and lavender. It was light, and certainly not overwhelming.

Tony looked warm and inviting as he walked purposefully towards the bed, comfortably dressed in a cotton t-shirt and dark wash jeans. He looked nice, but not the sort of nice like he was overthinking it. He'd figured he wasn't going to spend much time clothed anyway.

Loki set his book down in his lap, smirking fondly before returning his attention back to the pages. "How was that meeting?"

Tony's hand slipped over the book. He took it from Loki, the papery texture sliding out from Loki's uncertain hands. "Boring," Tony said, shutting the book and setting it on the nightstand. The bed sank in the direction of his weight, pulling Loki in towards the little space between them.

Every inch of the god was tense, though his face asserted otherwise. Tony set his hand on Loki's thigh, curling his fingers down and inward. The muscle was taut and anxious beneath the smooth slacks. Tony's hand wandered downward. He kneaded his fingers against Loki's kneecap, grinning casually. "I heard you missed me."

Loki scoffed, wishing that he had the book to hide himself in. Tony's fingers were working the

silky lining against his knee, distracting him. "I do not recall exchanging any words with Banner." Tony's hand slipped away. Loki turned his head suddenly, conscientious of his facial expression. It gave him a rather pained appearance.

Tony was grinning, staring down at the bedding. "Well, let's just say that we'll both be happy that I'm taking lunch duty back." He kept his gaze down on the bed, reaching out his hand experimentally. Loki's leg was still tight. Tony squeezed his thigh, fighting down the pleased, amused flip in his stomach. "Are you angry with me for making you wait?" He asked, recalling their last breakfast together.

"Furious," Loki replied, latching onto the verbal challenge. He was better at that. His long arms folded in on themselves as he glared at Tony reproachfully.

"Well then," Tony said, lifting his head just enough to stare back at Loki from half-lidded eyes, "I'll have to make up for it."

He slid his hand down around Loki's thigh, prying the god's stiff legs a little wider so that he could move to sit between them. Loki laid perfectly still, his fervent eyes set on Tony as the man leaned forward, resting one arm against Loki's chest. The added weight forced Loki to shift more comfortably against the headboard, bringing him down closer to Tony. Loki was acutely aware of the way his body slid in towards Tony, the assured grin on Tony's face that only seemed to grow with every uncertain movement Loki made.

Tony rested his nose against the crook of Loki's neck. God, Loki smelled different today. Still himself, but also minty and sort of woodsy and... some odd sort of floral scent, like that lotion Natasha always wore. Jasmine? And he was wearing a collared button up shirt again, the obtuse bastard.

Tony pressed his open mouth to the line of Loki's jaw, delighting in the sudden arm that wrapped around his back as if to keep him there. Loki shifted to meet him but Tony brushed his lips against Loki's ear. "I was late," Tony whispered. "Don't let me get away with it."

Loki shuddered. Stark was pinning him against the headboard, creating uncomfortable pressure points in his stiff muscles. He gasped as Stark's wet mouth slid down the soft curve of his ear, teasing him with his teeth.

Stark leaned back to look at him mischievously, like he was getting away with something. "I shall see to it that you don't," Loki answered, his voice imperial as he cast his best unimpressed stare down at Stark.

Tony smirked, not fooled at all. He saw the way Loki's eyes widened as he sat up, twisting his thumb under the first shirt button.

Tony had a precise, mechanic-like approach to sliding the thin buttons through the tailored slits. Loki leaned his head back against the headboard as Stark's fingers slipped lower, undoing the bottom button differently with a swift tug. The shirt popped open.

Loki was wearing a v-neck undershirt beneath. Of course he was. Tony leaned his face against Loki's chest to hide his amusement. He slid his hands up Loki's warm chest over the soft cotton, resting them against his tight shoulders. He kneaded his hands down into muscle.

"Relax," Stark's voice muttered into his neck. Loki dropped his shoulders. Stark's tongue slid into the hollow of his throat, sucking at the tender spot. Loki groaned, bucking up against him. Suddenly Stark's arms were on either side of his head. He opened his eyes, startled.



Tony grinned fiendishly, leaning in closer. He parted Loki's lips with a slow, deliberate tease of his tongue. He let Loki's mouth try to make sense of things, the god's artless tongue unbridled in wanting. He tasted like caramel again, the bastard. Tony groaned, then bit Loki's bottom lip with a hint of possessiveness, delighting in the squeamish writhing that brought out in the god.

He could hear Loki's heavy breaths as he pulled away.

Stark's hand slipped his curled hair behind his ear. It was a gentle, intimate gesture. He didn't want to look at Stark then, though he could practically feel the man's stare burrowing into him.

Tony softly circled his fingertips behind Loki's ears, delighted at the flare of red that brought forth as the god stared stubbornly at the sheets. It was enticingly addictive how easy it was. How apparent Loki's desire was. There were so many things Tony wanted to do with him, so many things he wanted to try just to enjoy Loki's responses. It was taking every last ounce of his self control not to give into the urge.

Stark saved Loki from his anxious turmoil by returning that mouth to his neck, sucking at the delicate skin there. By the nine, Stark felt good. He wanted to run his fingertips along skin. Did Stark still have that contraption in his chest? No? Then what did he have? He was so curious.

Tony sighed as those long fingers hesitantly slid beneath his shirt. Loki's cold fingers wandered along his back, exploring every groove of muscle woven around bone, dipping down into the curves of his spine. Tony closed his eyes as wide palms slid around his ribs, seeking the front of his chest. "You know," Tony said. "It comes off." He smirked, leaning back so that he could free his t-shirt from him.

Loki's lush green eyes wandered across the marble of scar and flesh, his fingers curiously slipping into the mesh of grooves. "Do I hurt you?" He asked quietly.

"No," Tony said with generous amusement, leaning in enticingly. As Loki's fingertips roamed to their heart's content against his skin, Tony felt a surge of endearment. God, he could work with this. He leaned forward and took Loki's stubborn mouth, relishing the way Loki's cold breath slid into his own.

Stark's fingers slipped under Loki's shirt and he gasped, his back arching and tensing before relaxing as Stark's mouth met his skin even before the shirt was off. Stark sat back and tugged the cotton from him, tossing it over onto the floor. His dark eyes were shot wide as he grinned down at Loki, enjoying the way Loki's dark hair fell around his watchful face. Loki pulled his freed arms in closer, feeling more exposed than he had in the entirety of his life. He wondered if Stark could feel how hard he was as the man leaned away, scooting backwards on the bed.

Loki was just about to speak when Stark's hands wrapped around his knees and pulled him down from the headboard in one long tug. His hair twisted around his face as he laid flat on the bed, flushed in blooms of dark pink, his eyes a lusty combination of black and dark green. Stark's warm hands slid sensually down to his hip bones. He relaxed into the bed with a pleased sigh. Then those hands met friction as they slid inside the waist band.

He looked down just in time to see Tony undo the slacks with his teeth. The zipper groaned in Stark's deft grip, Loki's legs kicking absently, his hips torn between bucking forward and pressing themselves down into the bed. Tony sat up with more than a little pride.

Stark popped his finger into his mouth. Loki watched him in sharp anticipation as Stark showily wet his finger with his tongue before freeing it with a devious glance towards him. His heart had been beating fast before, but now Loki's heart screamed at his chest. His eyes fluttered for a

moment as Tony's finger slid down against his warm skin, circling right at the bottom of his stomach, sending a jolt through him. "I told you not to let me get away with making you wait," Tony said. Loki muttered something in retort too low for him to hear. He crawled back over Loki, kneading his hands against Loki's shoulders.

Stark's tongue slipped down inside of him again, drawing up a moan. He bucked up against the man, grasping his hands into Tony's shoulder blades. Tony laughed softly, and Loki swallowed the sound. It took Tony a considerable amount of effort to break away. He was hot and dizzy with desire, but still in control. "I think," Tony said, sitting back, sliding his hands down inside Loki's dress trousers, half expecting to find yet another pair of trousers, "I should make it up to you."

Cold air greeted Loki's legs as Tony peeled the dress slacks back. He threw them over the side of the bed. Loki watched them hit the wall as Stark's fingers dug into his thighs, spreading his legs wider. Tony bent down and slid his mouth over the band in Loki's briefs, each little tooth shooting a spark tingling down inside Loki. Tony moaned obscenely, distracted by the tight heat in his own erection. He sat up and undid his jeans impatiently, breathing a sigh of relief as he tossed them in the direction of Loki's discarded trousers.

Tony slid his hands down inside Loki's strained briefs, watching with satisfaction as Loki's head tilted back into the bed. Overwhelmed, Tony swiftly pressed a kiss to Loki's hip bone, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. Then he tugged the briefs away and tossed them on the floor.

They weren't even to the best part, the part that Tony had put some thought into, and Loki looked deliciously obscene. Tony wanted to memorize every inch of him before Loki opened those astute eyes again.

Tony rolled Loki over onto his stomach, the bed sheets rustling in the motion. Loki reacted to each press of skin on skin with little moans and shudders as Tony's mouth worked its way slowly around the back of his neck, the man's fingers curling against his shoulder blades and exploring as though he had all the time in the world. Tony glanced over to see Loki's fingers twist down into the sheets as he pressed his face to the pillow, hiding the sounds Tony wanted to hear. Loki shivered when Stark's lips reached the bottom of his spine. He heard Tony moan above him.

Tony's calloused hands urged him to roll over onto his back again, and Loki's entire being felt molten as he turned to Stark's insistent will. He was hardly aware of the slack in his lips that made Tony bite down on his own.

Suddenly, Stark's hands were tugging him again, and Loki leaned his chest up to see just as Stark dragged him to the edge of the bed. He looked up between the locks of dark hair obscuring his face, a question on his lips. "First time," Tony said, clicking as he tossed his head towards the side, "and you've got the biggest kneeling kink I've ever seen." Tony's knees sank to the cold floor. "Might as well get it right," he whispered low in his throat, a spark in his eye.

"That was not what I meant—" Loki said breathlessly, sitting up. Tony caught his hands and set them on his shoulders, staring patiently at Loki in blatant disbelief. "That is not at all what I—" Stark was sliding him inside his mouth. He choked out a startled, needy moan in his broken voice. He slid his hands into Stark's hair, crying out as Stark rubbed him against the roof of his mouth. He shook when Stark released his aching cock, curling expert fingers around his balls, softly teasing him. He had never wanted anything as much as he wanted Stark right now.

Tony sucked in a cool breath through his hot mouth, glancing up at Loki with slicked, swollen lips. Loki's fingers combed enticingly along his scalp, beckoning him forward. Tony grinned, soaking in the way Loki wanted him, needed him. He slid his tongue obligingly along the hard length in front of him, taking his time as he felt Loki's pulse in a vein. Loki moaned, one of Stark's hands

sliding up along his hip, his touch like a burn against the skin there. He needed more of that mouth.

Tony hesitated, his breath softly brushing against Loki's strained erection. This was going to be it. In a moment it was all going to be over. Loki's fingers twisted in his hair as Tony pressed a soft kiss to his thigh.

He moaned, the sound sinking deep in his throat, as Tony took him in his mouth again. A desperate, whimpering sound slipped from him, but he could not have cared less as he dropped his head back. Tony's cheeks hollowed around him. The man hummed a lusty, contented note.

Tony took him deep, searing the feeling into his brain. And the smell, and god, those frantic, desperate, needy sounds Loki was making. He wondered if he'd ever hear anything that feral and wanting again. Loki's fingers dug into his scalp, tugging him forward as his hips bucked towards Tony's skillful mouth.

His dirty moan rang in Tony's ears as the taste of him flooded Tony's mouth. Tony mentally congratulated himself as he swallowed, burning the image of Loki undone above him into his memory as a cough shook him.

Dimly, Loki was aware that he was clutching onto Tony's head as if it was the last floating thing in the sea. Tony felt Loki's fingers abruptly let go. That stupid, pleased grin was back on Tony's face again. It delighted him that Loki let him bend the god back down onto the bed, Loki's breath still frantic and face flushed red.

Tony leaned down and let Loki taste himself in Tony's mouth, sighed as those long fingers slid down his back. One of Loki's arms fell back against the bed beside his head as he stared up at Stark, his eyes unnaturally soft. He felt one of Stark's hands curl around his wrist.

For a moment he panicked, tensing immediately. Stark's lips were at his ear then, whispering soft things that Loki would tell no one. *No one*. Loki let himself go. He relaxed as Stark guided his hand down, sliding it inside past the loose elastic band of his boxers.

Tony bucked into the uncertain fingers, moaning into Loki's mouth as those fingers slid down the length of him, craving and aching. He pressed his lips to Loki's throat, losing himself to the tilt of his hips and the thumb that slid itself around his slicked head.

He was hard in Loki's hand, his shaking kisses inarticulate and needy as he pressed his lips to Loki's skin. Loki slid his free hand through Tony's hair, muttering affectionate nothings as Tony came into his hand. The man collapsed down against him with a throaty groan.

Tony pressed his lips to Loki's skin before sitting back up and tearing his ruined boxers from him. "Next time they come off first," Tony muttered, pressing his face back down against Loki's chest. Utter exhaustion claimed every cell of his slender body.

"Next time," Loki said softly.

Tony's head snapped up. He relaxed when he saw that Loki was smiling. "Yeah, you bastard." He pulled himself in closer, unwilling to part from skin. "Next time, I'm going to make you work for it," he muttered.

Loki's slicked fingers twirled his hair around in reply, and Tony groaned, knowing damn well he was going to have to wash it but too content to care. He had already started drifting into sleep when he felt Loki's chest vibrate beneath him. "Will you leave tonight?"

"I'm not going anywhere tonight," Tony said, nuzzling his face into Loki's neck. He could not

recall ever feeling this good. This okay. Not in a very long time. Loki's arm wrapped around his back.

Loki pulled him out of falling into sleep a second time with a hesitant question. "Did...did all of Midgard think that is what I meant?"

"What?" Tony asked sleepily into his chest.

"Kneeling, Stark."

Tony shook with a laugh. "Not everyone, I'm sure." He felt Loki tighten uncomfortably. "Okay, no one," Tony said, just to make him relax. When Loki softened beneath him he muttered, "a few." Loki flicked his head with playful fingers.

He stared up at the ceiling, sensing the precise moment that Stark drifted off into sleep. Loki tried, but he could not recall a time when anyone had made him feel as Stark did. Like he was all that mattered to Stark, that he was everything that Stark wanted. That he was worthy. He tightened his grip around Stark, pulling him in closer.

He closed his eyes, lulled into sleep by the steady sound of Stark's contented breathing.

## Chapter 21

Tony rolled over, contented even before his eyes opened to the dim early morning light. As his soft brown eyes fluttered sleepily open, a stupid grin slipped onto his face. Loki's face was just inches from him on the other pillow, his eyes closed. His lips were parted, his breath too soft to hear. His dark hair slunk down onto the pillow in untamable waves. He looked supernaturally gentle that way, off in a peaceful dream somewhere.

Tony was in no rush to get up. It was unnatural to see Loki so unguarded, and Tony wanted to take the time to etch those little features into his mind. The tiny wrinkles that creased around Loki's eyes, the slim scar on his cheek that Tony hadn't noticed before, the cupid's bow of his lips.

He murmured something, dreaming. Tony reached over to soothe him, gently brushing a lock of hair behind his ear. Loki's face relaxed. Tony closed his own fingers into his hand, brushing them against his palm.

In the back of his mind, Tony thought that he'd better hold on tight to this morning. He didn't know what was coming next for them, but he knew at the very least, they were two strong personalities and there was bound to be conflict. They had very different lives too, and he wasn't certain what would happen. But in this morning, just as it was, everything was right. He wanted to remember this side of Loki always.

It was a while later that Loki stirred again, saying something in a language Tony could not understand. He reached out his hand once more, stroking Loki's hair.

The god sensed something gentle, and his cheek twitched. He opened his eyes to see Tony smiling back at him, the man's warm brown hair still wrecked from the night before. "Hey," Tony said quietly. Loki's lips flinched in a closed lip smile as his eyes timidly looked Tony over, memories of the night before crawling back to him. Tony's fingers slipped around back behind his ear. The man pulled himself in closer.

Tony had been wondering, and was delighted to see, that Loki's face flushed at the way he rubbed his fingers behind Loki's ears. He leaned in to kiss him, frightened that Loki would say something to pull away.

The kiss that greeted him was pleasant, relieved. The bed whispered as Loki rolled in closer, hiding himself as he pressed his lips to Tony's neck. The man let out a moan that sounded more like a shout in the hushed room, wrapping his arm back around Loki. He let that tongue do as it pleased, playing slowly at the skin of his neck. No one would think twice about seeing a mark on Tony's neck.

Loki felt fingers wrap around the back of his neck and send a faint shiver down to the base of his spine. He didn't want to say a thing, as if staying silent would keep time from turning. Instead he dropped his lips to the hollow of Tony's neck, felt the pulse there with his tongue.

Loki didn't know what to do with himself held like this. Stark's fingers stilled against his back, his fingertips pressed to Loki's bare shoulder blades just enough so that they wouldn't be forgotten. Tony felt Loki's mouth let go, a hand slide up to his chest and rest there.

Tony didn't move, his heart beating anxiously. He didn't want to let go and lose this. He could feel Loki's warm breath against his chest, feel the expansion of his lungs against his arm with each respiration.

Loki must've felt the same, he thought. Hell, Tony thought, he felt vulnerable and he wasn't even the one that turned bright red with a touch behind the ears. The thought sparked a fond murmur of laughter in his throat. He'd better be the first to act. "How does breakfast sound?" Tony whispered.

"Pleasant," Loki replied, his face still hidden from Tony's view. Tony leaned up slowly, running his hand down Loki's side and cupping his hip before letting go. Tony glanced around the room, realizing that going out was the only way to get something. He didn't want to grab whatever was in the kitchen. This was a good morning, and it deserved better than stale cereal. He glanced down to see that Loki's green eyes had been watching him.

"Would you like that coffee I brought you before?"

Loki nodded his head. Tony took a deep breath, stretching his arms. "Stark." Tony turned back around, that content grin on his face even as his eyes inquired. Loki rubbed his pointer finger against his own hair, raising his eyebrows at Tony.

Tony's hand went to his hair. He laughed. "I should probably shower before I go out, huh?" Loki rolled over onto his side, as if Tony wouldn't notice the heat that was crawling across his skin. The bed bounced as Tony stood up, padding towards the shower. He paused in the doorway. "Wanna join?" Loki's head twisted back and forth in the pillow, hiding the smirk on his face. "Next time then," Tony said, closing the door.

Loki heard the shower turn on and rolled over onto his back, letting his hand drop back beside him on the pillow. He'd been wrong about himself, and it was a strange realization. That mortal wasn't below him, and he couldn't even pretend it on a morning like this. An ache sang out in his chest and he dropped his hand against it, as if that would silence it.

It was a while before Tony came back from the shower. Loki watched him walk past and open the closet, digging through for a t-shirt and pants that would sort of, kind of fit. "You don't mind?" Tony asked, holding up a plain cotton shirt that had never been worn.

"No," Loki said, smirking. Tony grinned back with a half smile, not really sure what Loki was smirking at. He threw it over his head and tugged it down quickly.

"I'll be back in a bit," Tony said, bending down to kiss his forehead.

Loki rolled over when Tony left, kneading his fingers down into the sheets. He was utterly, hopelessly unaccustomed to feeling this...demure? To the point that he couldn't even get upset about it. It was mortifying. Maybe in a few hours he'd be up for a murderous rampage, but not now. He rose up slowly, and set his feet over the side of the bed. When he glanced down he saw Tony's jeans crumpled on the floor beside his dress slacks. For a while he just stared at them, lost in thought. With a sigh he got up and followed Tony's path into the shower. He smirked when he saw that Tony had taken one of the lotions (Amber Woods) from the basket. He let the hot water run over him.

He pulled a shirt over his head just as Tony opened the door, carrying a tray of coffee and a familiar paper bag. Tony started chatting as he set things down, Loki sliding imperiously onto a barstool. Tony set a cup of coffee in front of him, speaking with bright eyes. It was a nice kind of babble that didn't bother Loki as he drank his coffee with "hmm" and "mhmm" as his only responses.

Tony lingered until late morning, when he saw Loki's eyes start to veer off to the side, knowing without being told that he wasn't feeling well. "You should lay down," Tony said, trying to escort him to the bed.

“I’m quite capable, Stark,” Loki said, batting his hand away. Tony let him lay down with a little huff. “You may go,” Loki said, reading Stark’s anxiety and thinking that he had things he should be doing anyway. “Your comrades will become suspicious,” he said, anticipating an argument. “Go.”

Tony only complied because in that moment he was more frightened of starting a fight with Loki and ruining things than being found out. “I was thinking,” Tony said. “If you need me, just tell Jarvis that the air conditioner in the room is broken. He’ll tell me, and I’ll know what it means.” Loki nodded, his eyelids half-open. “Can I come back tonight?”

“Of course,” Loki said in a distant murmur. Tony lingered at the door even after he knew that Loki was asleep. There had to be something more that he could do for Loki. He left to go to Jane’s, still trying to wrap his head around and adjust to what had happened in the last twenty-four hours the entire drive there.

## Chapter 22

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony found Jane curled up on a tattered sofa, cradling a bowl of popcorn that was wider than her across her stomach. She turned her head against the armrest, her brown hair tangling in the motion. “Hey,” she said.

“What am I interrupting?” Tony asked, walking around her to get a look at the television.

Jane failed to hide her face behind her wrinkled shirt collar. “That’s the wrong dress,” Tony said, leaning over the back of the couch. “I think.”

“It is,” Jane agreed, reaching for the remote. She was on her seventh consecutive episode of a bridal dress show. “We can pretend this didn’t happen,” she said as the TV turned off.

“My lips are sealed,” Tony said, smiling down at her. She raised an eyebrow, curious about his sudden appearance. “Just so you know,” he said. “I give wonderful wedding presents.” Jane smiled, leaning up and knocking a wave of popcorn onto the floor. “Well, my staff does, but same thing. You probably don’t want me picking out gifts.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be an issue,” Jane said. She set the bowl down on the floor, crunching a few pieces of popcorn. “I don’t even know why I started watching these stupid shows. Darcy set me up with two blind dates this month. They were...” She grimaced. “Interesting.”

“Where is she?” Tony asked, curiously glancing around the disheveled lab.

“Training her intern,” Jane said flatly. She smirked at Tony, then winked in such a heavy handed way that Tony had to hold back from laughing.

“I get it,” he said with amusement.

Jane tiredly combed her fingers from her hair with a lazy grin, sitting up. She leaned down and stretched her legs on the couch. “I want you to tell me you know something,” Jane said in a mumbled voice against her shins, “and I also don’t.”

“I was more hoping that it would be the other way around,” Tony said, sliding onto the armrest beside her. She leaned up, staring at him with her hands placed firmly on her knees. “I’m a little burnt out on the whole waiting for Thor to show up thing.” Jane picked up on an odd tone in his voice. She tried placing her finger on it but failed. “I need Loki to get better.”

Jane blinked slowly, running the words back in her head. They sounded just as odd the third time. “Sorry for asking,” Jane said. “But I thought you said Loki was getting better?”

Tony nodded his head to the side. Jane slid her feet over, making room for him. “He is,” Tony said. “But...” She studied his sharp brown eyes as they burrowed their way into something in the distance. “He’s still suffering,” Tony said. “There’s got to be something else we can do. He says it’s magic,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. Magic was not a word he liked hearing come from his mouth. “But...” He rolled his shoulders, his eyes set in thought.

“I know you don’t like hearing this,” Jane said. “But without that book he wants we’re kind of out of luck.” She tucked her feet up underneath her, leaning back into the couch. “He’s smart, Tony. If



he can't figure out what went wrong with his spell work, and he knows everything there is about it, then it's not like we're going to discover the answer."

Tony rubbed his hand beneath his chin, scratching his beard. "Maybe," he said.

"Why's it bothering you now?" Jane asked, and for a moment Tony really, really wanted to tell her. Because he didn't think that Jane would tell. Didn't think that she had the resources to remove Loki, and they were kind of tangled up in each other's problems anyway. If someone was going to understand, it was probably her. Besides, he was dying to burst out about it to anyone that would listen. She must've seen the odd look in his eyes because she said, "it's alright. I meant what I promised, Tony. If I can get that healing book out of Asgard, I'll bring it to you for him."

Jane dropped her hands into her lap, flexing her fingers. "You..." She said softly. "Won't trust Thor with taking him back, will you?" She dropped the question quietly. Tony grinned uncomfortably. "I don't know what happened Tony, but I don't think Thor would do anything to actually hurt Loki. I really don't." She watched Tony in nervous anticipation, waiting for his answer. It came slowly.

Tony remembered Thor in two lights. One, the guy that had saved his ass in New York and become his friend in the months that followed. Thor had a floor in the tower. An empty floor, but one all the same. Two, Thor was the entire reason for Loki's existence in the tower, and Tony was angry at him for Loki's state, and grateful to him in a way just because Loki was there, and Tony also dreaded how he would react. He didn't have a grip on Thor anymore. "Who knows," Tony said.

"It sucks," Jane said. "He's probably forgotten about me and I'm still waiting for him," she said somberly. "I've spent years of my life waiting for him and nothing's changed." She smiled sadly, her gaze landing on a stack of research Tony had snagged for her. "I hate thinking that Loki is right."

"He's like that," Tony said. He glanced over at her, and suddenly he understood why he'd wanted to come. "Let's say that Loki stayed at the tower," Tony said. "How do you think Thor would react?" It was as close to the real question he wanted to ask as he could get.

Jane answered without any sense of pretense. "Forget what Thor wants," Jane said. "Would Loki be willing to stay?" She seemed amused. "As what? A consultant?"

"Something like that," Tony said.

"I don't think he'd stay," Jane said. She got up from the couch, missing the look on Tony's face. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Whatever you've got," Tony said brightly.

Jane returned from the fridge carrying beers in both hands.

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Tony seemed a little distracted when he opened the door that evening. Loki leaned up onto his elbows, lying on his stomach. "Your return is later than expected."

"Did you miss me?" Tony asked deviously, raising an eyebrow as he rolled up his shirt sleeves. Loki pushed the book in front of him onto the floor with a flick of his hand. It hit the concrete with

a loud smack. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Your timing leaves much to be desired," Loki said. He leaned up a little higher, his brow creasing. Something was different about Tony. "Come here."

Tony couldn't play around with that voice. He walked eagerly to the bedside as Loki sat up. "What have you been doing?" Loki asked.

"Don't tell anyone," Tony said conspiratorially, leaning in close to Loki, "but Jane watches bride shows. *I* watched bride shows today." Loki's fingers slipped beneath his soft shirt collar, pulling him down closer. Tony assumed that meant the answer was good enough. Anticipation swept through him as Loki's head tilted to the side, bringing Tony's lips close enough that he could feel Loki's breath against his own.

Loki smelt stale beer on Tony's breath. He tensed. An unhappy Tony flickered in his mind. "What were you and Jane discussing," he said, his voice echoing against Tony's lips. Tony leaned forward, yearning to press his tongue inside that inquisitive mouth. Loki just leaned back and held him in place by his shirt like it was nothing.

"Oh, you know. Molecules. Nuclear fusion. What we'd name our own element on the periodic table. Scientist stuff. You wouldn't understand."

Loki kneed him for his trouble. Not hard enough for it to really hurt, but Tony fell into him whining and moaning all the same. "Not fair, jackass," Tony hissed. Loki shoved him off and then pinned him to the bed, glaring. Tony's heart shot off. That wicked stare sent heat flaring through him.

"Do not lie to me," Loki said.

"Okay," Tony said. "I said I'd name it Starkium, but really I'd name it TonyStarkIsAwesomeium."

The joke meant nothing to Loki. He cocked his head to the side, carving his glare into Tony's placating smile. The man's hand snaked up around his back hopefully. "Has she found something?" Loki tried. Tony shook his head, dragging his hair against the bedspread. "No matter," Loki said.

"It's kind of a matter," Tony said.

Loki leaned off of him. "Must you think on the matter," he said. He sat up straight, slicking his tongue disdainfully against his teeth in a nasty sneer. "It vexes me that the issue of Thor should trouble me here."

"Are you... angry with him?" Tony asked, not moving from the place where Loki had set him. When the god turned to look down at him, it was a look that would've taken years for Tony to peel back all of the layers on.

Loki set one arm in close to Tony, leaning down on it. "Must he mar everything?"

Tony grinned a little, scooting in closer to him on the bed. "Are you trying to say you're into this," Tony teased him, rocking a pointed finger towards Loki and then back towards himself. Loki smirked pridefully, glancing away.

"I do not wish to think of him when I am with you," Loki said. Tony relaxed, thinking they were moving on to fun things, but Loki wasn't finished with him yet. That quizzical look was back in his eye. He leaned down over Tony, intrigued by the silencing effect that had on the man. "What

troubled you today?"

"The usual," Tony said. "World peace. Politics. Why Clint keeps taking my mug from the kitchen. He knows it's mine, it has my name right on it." Tony whined.

"Stark," Loki said, "did I not just tell you not to lie to me?" He wondered if Jane had said something about him, or put some nonsense into Stark's head about Asgard. That might explain the peculiar behavior.

"I'm not sure. Could you tell me again?" Tony asked. Loki sighed, somewhere between being dramatic and annoyed. "Maybe a little closer to my face?"

Loki scooted back away from him. Just as Tony opened his mouth, Loki dropped his feet in Tony's lap. "Fine," Loki said. "If you won't tell me, then you may rub my feet."

"And then—" Tony said, raising his eyebrows.

"You may rub my feet some more," Loki said, letting his smug grin light up his face. Tony's face fell flat. Loki wiggled his toes.

Tony glared down at the feet in his lap. After a stubborn moment he swung one hand over and grabbed Loki's foot in a tight squeeze. Loki didn't even yelp, as he'd hoped. He just wiggled his toes expectantly. "Ugh," Tony said. "Do I look like your personal foot massager?"

"Yes," Loki said. He felt Tony's hand give his foot another squeeze. "And in the morning I want you to bring me coffee. And cronuts, or whatever Midgardian nonsense you can find."

"I am not your butler," Tony said.

Loki smirked, knowing that Tony's resolve would crumble. "That is the weakest foot massage I've ever had." Tony glared at him, then squeezed Loki's foot as hard as he could. "Poor technique," Loki said dismissively.

"I can't believe this," Tony grumbled, suddenly trying. He had clever hands, accustomed to detailed work. It wasn't long before Loki was genuinely pleased. His worry over the man quietly dissipated. Tony's annoyance gave way to quiet fascination. Loki's feet were softer than he expected, and smelled faintly of peppermint. He found it odd, but he wasn't about to complain. "Alright," he said as a cramp struck his hand, "you just hit your indulgence quota for the month."

"I doubt it," Loki said, sliding his foot back and curling his toes against Tony's thigh. "Ah yes," he said as though he'd just remembered. "I do believe Steve had expected you to drop by tonight?" Tony let out a loud groan. "So you do remember. He thought you'd forgotten."

"I promised him I'd fix his sound system. It's glitching." His expression flipped. "And how do you know about that?"

"Guess who I had dinner with," Loki said with a smirk. Tony glared right back at him. "You'd better not keep the Captain waiting," Loki said, playfully dismissing Tony with a wave of his hand.

"You planned that," Tony accused.

"Of course I did," Loki said. Tony stood up from the bed with a huff. "Remember, caramel coffee, extra creamer, sugar." The indignant scoff on Tony's face was delicious. "Oh," Loki said. "It is quite cold down here at night, you may keep the bed warm if you would like."

“Just for the record,” Tony said, “that is the strangest invitation I have ever heard. Ever.” He took a step back towards the door. Suddenly a grin hit his face. He shook his head, debating whether he should say it at all. “I can’t wait to hear what your bedroom talk sounds like. Jesus.”

Loki just glanced imperially at him. He felt much better ordering Tony around, and having a sense of control in the situation. It almost made up for the lack he felt in everything else. Loki had spent much of the day thinking of ways to feel a little more in control. Tony vanished behind the door, already too busy fuming over Steve having dinner with Loki to think of anything else. Satisfied, Loki tucked himself into bed.

Tony returned twenty minutes later. It surprised (and by surprised, he meant disappointed) him that Loki had gone to sleep. He eased his way into the bed, careful at first not to wake Loki. Then, annoyed at Loki for the foot rub (seriously?!) and Steve (really, pushing it), he bounced the bed and made noise on purpose. Loki woke, but did not react. He let Tony make all the noise he wanted until he was curled comfortably beneath the sheets.

If Loki had thought about it, he would’ve realized that there was more to it than bossing Stark around. Loki was unsure of himself, and dragging his feet and stirring trouble would distract him from that.

## Chapter End Notes

*writing feels a bit off for me right now, but I put this up so we can go ahead and move on to other things ;)*

## Chapter 23

“This is for you,” Clint said, tossing an open shipping container onto the table. The smirk on his face caught Tony’s attention before the box did.

“What?” Tony demanded. He leaned off the kitchen counter. He’d been drinking what was left of his carry out coffee after dumping it in his “Tony” mug.

Clint smirked, snickering softly. “It’s yours,” he said.

Tony glanced down at the unmarked cardboard box. It was long and narrow. He ran through a series of possibilities. Tony became very conscious of his face. He set the mug down, reaching for the box. Either his morning was about to become infinitely more interesting, or Clint was pulling his leg.

He was almost relieved to slide a long flat iron from the box. He turned it over, reading the text beneath a smiling model. A hair straightener. He started grinning too, but for an entirely different reason. “Didn’t you see my name on the front?” Tony asked.

“It was the same size as the arrows I ordered,” Clint said.

Tony’s eyes rolled back. “Don’t you have enough? What are you doing ordering them through the mail? Doesn’t Shield buy them?”

“Not with the modifications I wanted—what are you doing buying a hair straightener?”

“Maybe I just want to look good,” Tony said, pointedly brushing his dark hair. “Is there a problem?”

“How can you use this without burning your scalp?” Clint asked seriously, picking up the box for inspection. The label was printed in bright pink and blue with floral text. It seemed remarkably un-Tony like. But then again, Clint thought, Tony did have a tendency to sport a Dora the Explorer wrist watch. Maybe he didn’t understand Tony’s style.

Tony stuck his hand out for Clint to return it. The archer stared skeptically at him before dropping it in Tony’s open palm. Tony saw Clint’s eyes drift up to his hair, like he was checking how Tony had done it. “I stopped at the bakery,” Tony said, pointing to a bag on the table. Distract Clint with food. Good plan.

Clint pulled the bag open, staring down. “I don’t get this cronut phase,” he said. “Can we bring back Pepto-Bismol donuts?”

“This isn’t Portland,” Tony said. “It’s New York.” He shook his head, then took a sip of his coffee.

“They make a Captain Crunch one,” Clint said. “We could give it to Steve. He’d love that.”

“You’ve clearly put some thought into this,” Tony said.

“I think I’ll see if Shield has any open mission assignments out there,” Clint said thoughtfully.

“What’re you doing up so early anyway?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Tony said. It was more like he’d had cold feet in his back all night, and Loki’s sleep talk, and if he wasn’t so newly infatuated, he would’ve woken Loki up. As it was, he had

retreated to the far end of the bed and still woken up with feet in his back and against his head.

They heard voices approach and turned to see Rhodey and Steve walk in wearing running clothes. “Am I hallucinating?” Rhodey asked, rubbing his eyes. “Is that Tony? At eight in the morning?”

“And he brought food,” Clint chimed in, gesturing to the bag.

“What did you do?” Rhodey asked, his eyes narrowing.

Tony snapped to attention, smiling incredulously. “Nothing,” he said, his eyes widening. “I’m capable of making an appearance before noon!”

“Capable,” Rhodey said. “But not likely.”

“Suspicious,” Steve agreed. Tony rolled his eyes. Steve and Rhodey exchanged a look. The Tony Look, if Tony got to name it.

“And,” Clint said gleefully, giving Tony just enough time to realize what was about to happen, “he got a hair straightener.” Clint snatched it from the table where Tony set it and waved it euphorically around. Tony dropped his head back with a loud sigh, bracing for the onslaught.

“Thank goodness,” Steve said. “He really needed one.” Tony’s mouth fell open in scorn. Steve shrugged indifferently.

“I’m going to the lab,” Tony announced, grabbing the straightener from Clint’s hands. “I’m going to invent a device to extract all the excess sass from this room.”

“Yeah, god forbid someone other than you have some sass,” Clint said.

“I’m going to make something just for yours first,” Tony said.

“Is it going to be an arrow so I can shoot myself?” Clint asked innocently.

“Good idea,” Tony said, disappearing behind the kitchen door.

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Tony set the straightener down on his desk in the lab. He ran his fingers through a layer of dust. Staring down at the powder on his fingers, he realized that it had been a few months since he’d spent any serious time inside the lab. He just hadn’t been able to bring himself to do it.

He wiped his hands off on his jeans, sighing. His neck ached as he looked up. Loki’s drawings were still taped to the wall. Tony felt the smile that tugged up into his lips.

He sat down in his chair, and let it roll a few paces back across the floor.

It was too bad that he couldn’t actually create a sass extractor, he thought as he picked back up an old project.

- - -

“I think this was for you,” Tony said, waving a box back and forth as he walked in hours later.

There was a fiendish grin on his face. His eyes lit triumphantly as he pridefully waited for Loki to speak.

The god looked from the box to Tony and back again, not making the connection.

Tony saw that there was white icing on the corner of his lips, the insufferable bastard. How could this vicious idiot with frosting on his face and poorly veiled confusion be a world conqueror? It almost made Tony angry. “This,” he said, pointing to the box. “Is yours.”

“What is it?”

“A hair straightener,” Tony said.

Loki went still, his eyes widening as the slightest bit of mortification slipped into his cheeks. “I believe that Jarvis,” he said with a dry mouth, licking his lips, “ordered that.”

“Mhmm,” Tony said, sauntering over. He dropped it beside Loki, leaning his hip against the countertop as Loki avoided looking up at him. Tony’s thumb flicked against his mouth, roughly brushing the icing away. “Clint could’ve found worse,” Tony said. He smirked. “He should know better than to open unmarked boxes with my name on them.”

“Clint?” Loki asked. He could already see the shit-eating smirk the archer would have on his face, infinitely worse than the one on Tony’s. He wondered if there was a way to kill Clint without Tony noticing.

“Yeah,” Tony said. He leaned down over Loki, picking up a lock of his hair. “I like the wild look though. There’s something punk rock about it.” He felt Loki’s breath drift against his shoulder.

“Silence, Stark,” Loki muttered.

“No way,” Tony said. He grinned down in a confident, pleased way that let Loki know he’d never even had a chance at getting the upper hand. “Unless,” Tony said, rubbing his thumb underneath Loki’s chin. “You have a clever way of silencing me.”

Loki glared stubbornly. “I fail to see why this amuses you,” he grumbled.

“I like to think of it as,” Tony said, taking his face in his hands, “you, with a chorus of birds fluttering in through the window in the morning, singing as you straighten your hair, thinking of me.”

He crumpled forward as Loki’s fist met his stomach. Tony wrapped his arms around Loki’s shoulders, undeterred even as he gasped in a breath. “Little sunbeams dancing around you, asking Jarvis—” Loki’s mouth found his, blunt and stubborn.

Tony moaned agreeably, finally getting a hit of what he’d been craving. “That,” he said, “is a much better method.”

“I do not think I can stand your cocky grin for the remainder of the evening,” Loki said, turning his head away to the side.

“Good choice of words,” Tony said, dropping his full weight against Loki. The god had to catch onto him to keep them from both falling off the barstool.

“Are you always this insufferable,” Loki complained. “I do not recall you acting like this before.”

“I think somebody just wants some time alone to straighten his hair,” Tony muttered against his ear, teasing him.

“You little shit,” Loki sniped. Tony burst into laughter, his chest shaking against Loki. It was too much. It was too fucking much in Loki’s stupid pretentious cadence. Tony laughed harder. “Does this amuse you Stark? You are not without grooming. I’ve seen you in the morning, I know how your hair looks without your deft fingers teasing it.”

“Mmm, watch that word choice there,” Tony muttered happily.

“I will bend *your* word choice to my will,” Loki hissed threateningly at him.

“Now you’re just doing it on purpose,” Tony said.

Loki shoved at him until Tony stood, limp from laughing. He advanced on the mortal, pushing him backwards. Tony didn’t seem frightened, as he wanted. Infuriating. Instead, Tony kept backing up eagerly in the direction of the wall, enthusiastically avoiding Loki’s advancement.

Tony practically pinned himself to the wall. Loki’s hand pushed one shoulder against the wall, and for a brief moment, he remembered the feeling of Stark’s throat against his fingertips. He instantly let go. In the moment of his hesitation Tony reached out and wrapped his arms around Loki’s waist. “I’m going to start talking again,” Tony said. “Unless you have a better idea.”

“Several,” Loki muttered, his voice still rife with anger and annoyance. He felt Tony sigh as his lips met the man’s neck. Tony tugged him in close, urging Loki to press him harder against the wall. And suddenly, the teasing just evaporated, and the feeling from the other night was back stronger than ever before. Loki stilled, pressing his nose to Stark’s neck. He closed his eyes.

Tony could sense his hesitation and pulled at him harder, his breath getting louder. “Stay right here,” Tony whispered.

Loki leaned down, and finally, finally that mouth was his again. Tony’s hot tongue slid against sugar slicked teeth, too eager at first. He moaned, rocking against Loki, fingers digging and clawing at fabric to pull him in tight. Stark wanted him, and the recognition crawled inside Loki and made itself at home. He shoved Tony tight against the wall, delight churning in his stomach as Tony writhed against him with a frantic moan.

Tony’s tongue slid down his neck when he offered it. Tony muttered enthusiastically, breathlessly. Loki leaned back just enough to peel off his shirt and toss it onto the floor before leaning into Tony again. The bright, needy flame in Tony’s eyes thrilled him. He almost forgot why he’d been annoyed with Tony at all.

Tony shoved a hand between them, yanking at the button on Loki’s slacks. Loki hummed agreeably, but made no effort to make things easier for Tony. “Just lean back a second,” Tony said impatiently, tearing slacks and briefs down the moment Loki’s hips rocked minutely back. “You —”

“Are you going to start talking again?” Loki asked in false curiosity. Tony glared, coiling back against the wall. Loki freed his legs from his clothes, kicking them to the side.

“Yes,” Tony said, greedily helping his hands to freshly bared skin, “because someone is—” Loki’s mouth swallowed the words right from him. Tony groaned, relaxing. Loki’s hand slipped enticingly along his waistband.

“What was that?” Loki whispered against his ear.



“I told you I would make you work for it this time,” Tony said. “So—” He pushed back against that mouth as it closed in, sucking a breath in through his nose. His shoulder blades ached as they dug into the wall. All he could think about was how fucking good Loki smelled, and how long it would be before he could get the chance to suck at the crook of his neck.

“Mmm, I do seem to recall that,” Loki muttered against his skin. The words sent a shiver racing down Tony’s spine. He wriggled against Loki, meeting nothing but resolute muscle. Loki’s fingers eased his jeans open. He could hear Loki breathing harder, feel his heart hammering in his chest, even as Loki pointedly kept Tony from seeing his flushed face.

Stark’s hands scrambled against his chest. Loki took his time, luxuriating in a slow dip inside Stark’s tight boxers, running his fingertips against coarse hair and warm skin as Stark impatiently pushed back. Stark always had a dizzying sense of urgency. It made no sense. Stark’s throat shook in a relieved moan as Loki freed him, curling his long fingers around a stiff erection. Tony thrust against him, desperate for friction and to free himself of his clothes. Loki just used his free hand to pin one of Tony’s wrists to the wall. He liked Stark writhing in his grip, aching and desperate.

He leaned in slowly, slowly, pressing his lips to Tony’s neck. His hot tongue slid against skin, grazing playful teeth against a throat that shook with needy breath. “Loki.”

“I do believe you were going to be quiet,” Loki whispered. Tony moaned, closing his eyes. That was the voice he wanted. He dropped his head to the side, giving Loki full access to his neck as the god slowly slicked his thumb in pre-come.

“That’s what—” Tony gasped when those fingers curled around him, holding steady.

“What was that?” Loki whispered. A grin slid up onto his lips. “What?” He whispered against Tony’s ear. The man moaned a hollow response, bucking into his hand. Loki rewarded him with a slow circle of his thumb. Tony’s free hand absently gripped Loki’s waist, tensing and relaxing as Loki began working in slow, deliberate thrusts. “Is this not a better idea?”

Tony’s eyes rolled back as he gasped, sore in every part of his body that contacted the wall, and too needy to care. He heard the pleasure in Loki’s voice as he whispered commands, and Tony was eager to comply. The world didn’t exist past the force holding him to the wall, murmuring into his skin. It was intoxicating.

Stark came with a throaty groan into his hand, gasping. He hit his head against the wall with a thud. Stark went limp, slumping slightly as Loki released his wrist. Seeing Stark so spent only encouraged the tight ache in his cock.

Tony felt fingers slip under his jaw. Loki raised an eyebrow at him, and flushed and spent, Tony still smirked. It pleased him that Loki’s face was ruddy, even with that expectant eyebrow. Loki’s hands slid down to his shoulders and pushed gently.

Tony stepped away from the wall before sinking to his knees. “Kink,” Tony said. “I totally called it,” he muttered, his breath still irregular.

“Talking, Stark,” Loki muttered. Tony took him into his mouth with little more than an eye roll. He curled his fingers around Loki’s hips as he felt fingers seeking a grip in his hair. Tony controlled the thrusts, manipulating Loki’s bucking hips in favor of his own pace. He was just beginning to enjoy the throttled, abandoned sounds echoing from Loki’s open mouth when the god came.

Tony ran his tongue across his teeth, standing on shaking legs. He was about to say something, but Loki surprised him by pulling him in closer. Arms closed in around his back. Loki rested his head

against Tony's shoulder. Tony relaxed. Loki closed his eyes, fighting with the uncomfortable knot in his stomach. As long as Tony was there it wouldn't get the better of him.

Tony slid his hands in around Loki's waist. He stared at the empty wall, listening to Loki's anxious breaths calm down. With a heavy sigh, Loki leaned off his shoulder. "You know," Tony said suggestively, "there are ways to be more creative." He grinned brightly, acting careless.

"Get me something to eat," Loki said.

"Give me another couple minutes and I—" Tony said cheerfully. Loki knocked the words from him with a menacing stare. With his wrecked face the effect was moot, but Tony stopped all the same. "Really," Tony said. "You make it too easy." Loki's hands slid down against his sides, lingering for just a moment before Loki walked away and slumped onto a barstool.

Tony sighed, staring at that bare ass on metal. Honestly, it was a crime that he wasn't putting his more creative impulses to work. He had gotten the wall like he wanted though, so that was something. And the voice. Oh, that voice. He was going to work really hard on bringing out that voice.

The bag from the morning crumpled open as Loki fished out one of the few remaining cronuts from the dozen that Tony had left him.

After a few more mental snapshots Tony joined him. He dropped his leg against Loki's, privately thrilled when Loki did not pull away. Loki just sucked the icing off his fingers, completely oblivious to the curl in Tony's lip as he watched. "Tomorrow you should bring something I have not tried."

Tony said nothing, thinking. He had a glazed look that returned whenever Loki wasn't looking at him. "And coffee," Tony said when the moment had long passed.

"Need I spell out everything," Loki said lightly.

"Yes," Tony said, tracing his finger against Loki's thigh. He stopped, and rested his elbow against the counter as Loki watched him. "We should argue more often," Tony said suddenly, a devilish grin sparking.

"Sir," Jarvis announced. "Rhodey is requesting that you join him for drinks and won't take no for an answer. He seems to be under the impression that you are sulking. He's going to take the stairs to check your room and drag you out. How would you like me to proceed?"

"Tell him I'm dead," Tony said, leaning down against the counter.

"Sir..."

"Not available," Tony said. Loki's hand slipped against his shoulder.

"You should really consider," Loki said carefully, looking straight ahead. Tony sighed loudly in surrender, soothed by Loki's concern.

"Tell him twenty minutes," Tony said. When he stood he set a hesitant hand on Loki's shoulder. Loki didn't move as Tony let it slip, then went to pick his clothes up off the floor.

"Stark," Loki said as Tony pulled his pants on.

"Yeah?"

“Something different,” Loki said. “And coffee.”

“Got it,” Tony said.

## Chapter 24

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lightning crackled across the sky, heralding the torrential downpour. Tony lugged a heavy paper bag beneath his coat, water drenching his hair and face. Winds whipped his clothes back and forth as he trudged through flooded city streets.

He was soaked when he walked into the small room, his wet fingers infecting the dry paper bag in splotches wherever he touched. Technically, Loki had tried bagels, and Tony was breaking his one directive, but the bagel shop was in closest walking distance.

He didn't do drive through. It had too much handing things.

Loki watched Tony unroll the paper bag, refusing to move from the bed. He'd slept alone the night before. Tony had passed out on the couch upstairs after coming back late with Rhodey. It was a marvel that Tony was up at all. He'd probably slept just a couple of hours. Perhaps Jarvis had reminded him of breakfast duty.

"There's poppyseed and—" His voice was drowned out by a clap of thunder, "in the container." Tony held up a packet of cream cheese. Loki glanced at it, then turned the page in his lap.

Tony stared at him for a second, then dropped his gaze to the bag in front of him. "Did...did you want something else?" Tony's shoulders were stiff and tight.

"No," Loki said loftily, his eyes drifting across a page.

"Well...do you want to join me?"

"In a minute." Loki turned the page as if he had all the time in the world.

Tony let out a loud sigh, brushing his hand back through his wet hair. Water fell to the floor in loud splatters. The entire time he'd been out that morning, exhausted from the night before, dazed and sleepy, shivering in the cutting wind, shaking as it slipped inside his coat, wet and freezing, he'd been thinking of Loki. Imaging how pleased the god would be to find an attractively drenched Tony at his door. How he'd have to admonish Tony for his carelessness, how his warm hands would greet Tony's face, maybe how'd they'd have to have a warm shower first... None of that.

It seemed as though Loki couldn't have cared less about Tony.

"I don't want to interrupt anything," Tony said harshly. Loki looked up, surprise marking his face despite attempts to conceal it. "I'll be going."

"There is no need for that," Loki said, his hand sliding over the pages of his book. He left it open on the bed. Tony stayed still, watching him closely as he stood. The god walked a circle around him to get to the bag, far too respectful and formal for Tony's taste. "What did you get?" Loki asked, peeking down inside the bag.

Tony's eyebrows flinched in an angry point for a split second. Loki did not notice. He slid down onto a barstool, wincing when he came into contact with raindrops left by Tony.

Thunder rattled the windows.

Tony's vision drifted from the half-opened bag, to the trail of cinnamon sugar crumbs left by Loki's bagel, to the bagel itself in Loki's long fingers. "Take a seat," Loki said, finishing a bite.

The cold clawed at Tony's skin. He shivered. He did not remove his wet coat. "I have a meeting to be getting to," Tony said.

Loki glanced up at him. Loki's mouth was full. He chewed, his cheeks comically soft beneath his sharp eyes. "You're welcome for getting breakfast," Tony said. Loki swallowed with a swift glance towards the bag.

"You—" Loki said. *Thank you* flashed through his mind, but his stomach churned at the thought. He didn't want to grovel. He was Tony's prisoner, technically. Food was part of the deal. It was Tony's responsibility. It wasn't like Loki could get it for himself.

He could read the anger in Tony's posture, and something else that he couldn't put his finger on. "You should eat something," Loki said pedantically, flitting right back into his typical dictatorial manner. He had become so bossy the last couple of days. Tony couldn't decide whether he'd just never noticed before or if it was something new.

Loki pretended not to be waiting, casually eating his bagel. He watched Tony closely from the corner of his eye. Tony's body wavered ever so slightly towards him before pulling away. Thunder roared outside. "I don't have time," Tony said.

He let himself back out the door before Loki could argue. The food in Loki's mouth turned bland. He chewed morosely, swallowing with a heavy gulp. He was not entirely sure what he had done.

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Tony hadn't been lying. Not entirely. The meeting was in the afternoon. He'd almost, *almost* forgotten about it with Loki consuming most of his thoughts. Before he would've obsessed over the meeting. He had still been dreading it, and it was the first thing Jarvis reminded him of in his wake up call.

He'd known about it for months. It was the one meeting he couldn't avoid, when the entire board of Stark Industries would be there. That included Pepper.

Tony fidgeted with his tie as he sat down. He'd overdressed for the occasion, determined not to give Pepper the satisfaction of seeing him underprepared. She'd complained mercilessly about his sloppy appearances at meetings, and accused him more than once of treating the company like a day at the ballpark.

A slip of a blue blouse peeked out from her trim cream blazer. She wore a pencil skirt that she kept nervously adjusting, minutely sitting up and down in her chair. She was beside the head of the table, noticeably distanced from Tony.

The long table of faces kept taking surreptitious glances at the two of them. Tony stood first, assuming control of the meeting. He made a brief, elegant speech that still garnered a few laughs. It was the kind of speech that Pepper would've rehearsed with him. The kind of speech that he hated to make, and was no doubt making Pepper grit her teeth now. He'd always been capable of them. Just not willing.

As the meeting progressed into quarterly projections, and target markets, and a thousand tiny details that Tony didn't care for, he fumed. Pepper had stayed in the company because she knew it

best, and ran it better than anyone that could replace her. They both knew that. In this quarter alone, they'd seen a massive spike in profits. Besides, Tony didn't want to run things, he wanted to design them. He didn't have the time to do both.

They had said that personal and business would be separate from the start. It definitely wasn't because Tony hadn't had the heart to sever ties completely. It definitely hadn't been that, he promised himself.

He glared at her perfectly crafted face, knowing damn well that it was the sort of look that took her thirty minutes to perfect. He knew because he'd waited on it more than once. He also knew that blue blouse. Why did she still have it?

God, he wished that he could've walked into this meeting with Loki draped around him. Loki could put her to shame with a single snide glance. Tony could see the flush that would crawl across her face, the pinched voice she'd answer with.

And she'd be disappointed in him. Oh, how she'd be disappointed. And he would parade it around her and relish the public relations storm of chaos it would create and... "Is there anything else that anyone would like to add?" A chipper secretary asked. Pepper shook her head.

"I believe that will be all," she said with a glance down around the table. "Thank you."

Chairs squeaked across the floor as papers rustled and bags zipped shut. Tony stood up from the chair with a heavy breath. He noticed too slowly that Pepper was walking towards him. She had a manilla folder in her hands. "Hello," she said curtly.

"Hi."

"There are a few things I need you to sign," she said.

Tony glanced at her bright blue eyes for a moment. It had been forever since he'd seen those eyes. He dug in his pocket for a pen.

She seemed surprised to see him flip open the folder and sign his name in large, curving loops without a word. Tony handed it back to her, promising himself he wouldn't take a glance at her eyes, and then did it anyway. It would've been better if Tony couldn't recognize her in them. They were the exact same blue that he remembered.

"Thanks," Pepper said. She nodded her head minutely, glancing around anxiously. Tony didn't have anything to say. "That's all I have for you," she said, sliding past him.

Tony's hand absently drifted towards one of the chairs. The conference room had emptied. He stood there, staring out the dismal windows in his lavish suit.

Pepper had been everything to him once, and she was gone now. His hand trembled for a split second against the chair. He let his hand slide from the dimpled fabric and fall against his silky trousers. Maybe Loki had gotten sick of him now. Maybe like Pepper, Loki had gotten sick of him and wouldn't just fucking tell him.

Tony watched a fork of lightning split the sky. He hoped he was wrong. He couldn't trust himself to make good judgments about these sorts of things anymore.

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Jane watched the landscape outside her window illuminate in brilliant flashes of white before fading away again. She couldn't just ignore a thunderstorm like a normal person. No matter how many times she'd been through this, she couldn't keep herself from checking at every lightning strike to see if Thor was there.

She stood at the window, glancing hopefully at trees and the corners of buildings. He could show up on any lightning strike.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her.

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Tony's phone rang just as he pulled a cotton t-shirt over his head. "Hello—slow down. Slow. Down."

"I was just thinking," Jane said, taking a deep breath. "Instead of waiting for Thor to come to us, why don't we just go to him?"

Tony set a closed hand against his dresser. He held the phone away from his ear as Jane's animated voice surged again. "I mean, it's possible to build a bridge, right? And whatever we can't figure out, Loki can assist with. I just don't see why we didn't think of it before, now that Loki's competent—" Tony winced. "He'll know what to do. He can fill in the gaps. We should get started right away."

Tony padded over to his bed and sat down. The soft cotton sheets sunk beneath him. He'd missed this bed. "Let's backtrack for a second," he said. "Aside from all the development bits, I don't know that Thor's going to be alright with us crash landing there."

There was an uncomfortable pause on the other end. "I'll just hit him with my car," Jane said brightly.

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. Jane had expected him to be on board in a heart beat. She didn't think that it would take convincing. "Tony," she pleaded. "Think about what we're going to accomplish. We're going to build a bridge to another world," her voice spun with wonder. "Especially since Loki—"

"We don't know what's on the other end," Tony cut her off. "Asgard could be at war, and we'd be letting all of that in." Jane tensed, holding the phone tightly against her ear. Tony had never disagreed with her about anything before, and it was strange for her to hear any sort of edge in his voice directed towards her. "The tesseract let monsters in, and we don't have the resources to fight off another invasion. I'm not fighting off another invasion."

Jane pulled her legs up against her on the tattered couch. "We..." She said, the excitement in her voice dimming out like a light, "could work on a design. It's unlikely that it would work. You know that." She picked at a stray strand on the couch. "There'd be a lot of trial and error."

Tony let his back drop against the bed, keeping his feet flat on the floor. He felt like an asshole. He didn't mean to disappoint Jane. He knew she needed the distraction. It was just that she hadn't fallen through a hole in space alone. Her interstellar travel had been in the safe arms of Thor. She hadn't made the last phone call of her life—Tony had to let it go. "You're right," Tony said, sounding glib again. "You know what? I'm sick of waiting for the guy too. We can't have our hair band night without him." Tony stood from the bed to begin walking towards the lab. "Send me

whatever you've got and I'll start working from this end."

"And Loki—" Jane said.

"Let's wait until we've got something to show him," Tony said. "I don't want to pay his consulting fee until I have to. It's astronomical."

"I'm sure," Jane said cheerfully. A small smile returned to Tony's face. "Alright," she said, already thinking of plans. "I'll send you what I've got and start working on it."

"Don't forget to sleep tonight."

"You too," Jane said. With a soft click the line went dead.

Tony wandered inside the lab, relieved to have a new project. He knew he'd be stewing about Pepper. He hated it. He thought that a new relationship would make everything about the old one disappear, but it didn't. It wasn't an instant cure. And Loki...Tony really didn't want to fuck things up with him. He really fucking liked the bastard, and it vexed him that maybe Loki didn't feel the same. Maybe he'd gotten Loki wrong. He was an excellent liar, wasn't he? Maybe this was a casual nothing to the god to pass time.

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Loki glanced at the clock. If Tony couldn't make lunch, he always made time for dinner. There was a little time left until Tony arrived.

He swung the bathroom door shut, his eyes falling on the straightening iron. He wanted Tony's stupid grin back. He'd even take that obnoxious taunting over the sullen faced Tony from this morning.

The cord slid between his fingers as he connected it to the socket after some trial and error. There was a neat little picture book inside the box that prompted him along. The booklet trembled in his fingers. The straightener fell with a clatter against the sink.

He loathed making mortal adjustments. He loathed being forced to use this device to get what he wanted. He loathed this little room that never changed, and the look on Banner's face whenever he appeared with food, and the fact that he, the god of mischief and lies, was forced to use this mortal contraption. He grabbed it with unnecessary force, yanking it towards him.

A puff of steam rose from its path along his hair. He stared in horror. Then dropped it.

With some resignation he picked it up again.

He wanted this, and he didn't. He loathed the thought of preparing for Stark (even the word repulsed him). Yet, he wanted to. Loki wanted Stark to know damn well what magnificence was before him, and if that magnificence included the aid of this wretched device, so be it.

That was the issue, really. He resented the fact that he couldn't just drape himself in armor and appear before Stark at his leisure.

He picked the iron up, making a better sweep this time. He was starting to look a little like his former self, and a pleased if not deviant smirk crept up on his mouth.



Stark needed to remember just who it was that he was keeping.

He flicked his wrist towards the wall, but his magic would not heed the call. Not even to singe a little hole in the tile.

The situation had been easier for Loki to stomach when he'd spent most of his time incapacitated, but as he healed with nothing to do but wait for Stark's appearance, dissatisfaction grew.

He returned order to his hair in a slow learning process. Wisps of steam followed the procession of the iron. He missed a huge portion in the back. When he finally set the iron down on the counter, Tony's unhappy face flashed through his mind.

He had not remarked on the man's drenched state, uncertain of what it was that the man wanted him to say. Surely Stark knew it was unusual? Surely Stark could have changed clothes if he wanted to? There was nothing for Loki to say on the matter.

He tapped his nail against the counter. He liked Stark when Stark was pleased. He just didn't want Stark to think that he was meek, or lying around all day waiting for him like a kept pet...he couldn't let Stark think that.

His ears pricked as he heard the security door open.

He bounded towards the bathroom door, ready to put the morning behind them. Whatever was troubling the man this morning was surely gone now.

Disappointment flooded him as he saw that it was Steve. "Tony's got a project," the Captain announced, carrying in two meals. He set them on the counter and took a seat, waiting for Loki.

Loki left the bathroom like a shadow, drifting over to the stool. Steve had sat there before, but now that Loki had grown accustomed to Tony, Steve sitting there felt wrong. Steve was looking at him strangely.

Then he was grinning. "So that was for you," Steve said. He popped open one of the styrofoam containers, evaluating Loki as he chewed a french fry. There were dents and odd curls in Loki's hair, and it was especially flat just in one spot, but he did look a little like his old self. "Tony told us it was his," Steve said, shoving the other box towards Loki to prompt him. "You should've seen the look on Clint's face." Steve ate another fry, like he was perfectly at home. "He's asked me how Tony uses it without burning his scalp twice. I told him to google it."

Loki glanced down at the food. It was strange to see Steve eating so eagerly. Usually Tony just sat there picking at things, pretending. Sometimes Tony would give him the parts of foods that he didn't like.

"It looks good," Steve said. He took a bite of a sandwich.

"Thank you," Loki said diplomatically. "What is Tony's project?"

Steve finished chewing, and wiped his mouth with a napkin. Sauce fell onto his white shirt. He sighed, scrubbing the stain with a napkin. "Forget it," he muttered.

Loki waited, but it seemed that Steve had forgotten the question. He tried again.

"I'm not sure," Steve said, eating another fry. He glanced down at the box, his calm demeanor stilling in thought. "How has Tony been?"

Loki's hand shot out to take the untouched sandwich. He peeled the wax paper from it. "Fine," he said. "Why do you ask?"

Steve smiled a little. "You both seem better, you know," he said, taking a bite.

Loki's eyes slid up in a peculiar half-lidded stare towards the ceiling. Did the Captain know? Surely Tony wasn't that self-destructive. The man knew better. "What do you mean?" Loki asked as carelessly as he could.

Steve's gaze flicked towards Loki's straightened hair. Tony was clearly making progress with the god. They were getting along now. Tony seemed happier too. It was obvious to Steve that Tony was benefitting from the assignment. Steve had known that Tony would. Tony had just needed to put his mind to work.

It was a disappointment that Loki hadn't been able to help them with any information, but Steve figured, Tony was happier and that was all that he really cared about. Ultimately Loki was Thor's call this time.

Steve didn't say anything. He just shrugged his shoulders. Loki took a bite, considering. He sincerely doubted that Tony had said anything, but perhaps the Captain was more intuitive than he gave the mortal credit for. "Perhaps you wish to say something on the matter?"

Steve didn't seem phased by the question, or even particularly interested in it. Loki relaxed. "There's nothing to really say," Steve said. He'd already finished his sandwich. "Though I'm a little surprised that Tony sent me tonight. Well, not really. To be honest," Steve said, picking up a fry, "I'm sure that it was a hard day for him."

Loki's muscles tightened. "Why is that?" He asked, believing that he was the answer.

"It was the yearly board meeting," Steve said. He rubbed at his forehead. "He had to attend with Pepper and a lot of important people." He glanced down at Loki's meal. It had hardly been touched. "Do you want something different?"

"This is adequate," Loki said. Steve appeared unconvinced. He seemed like he started to say something but stopped.

Loki was more interested in Tony. If Tony had seen Pepper, then he wouldn't be well. "This was excellent," Loki amended. "I am just afraid I lack an appetite tonight." He smiled placatingly. "Perhaps I should get some rest and leave you to enjoy your evening."

Steve stood. "Are you sure?"

"I will recover," Loki said, mentally urging Steve towards the door. Out, out, out.

Steve glanced at the boxes. "I'll take care of it," Loki said. He rose and walked towards the bed. "Please allow me to rest," he said, his back to Steve.

"Okay," Steve said.

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"Sir," Jarvis said drably. "Loki insists that his air conditioning is broken."

Tony didn't budge from the computer. His shoulders ached. He was probably well on his way to morphing into a hunched golem, but it didn't seem important. "Sir," Jarvis insisted.

"Is he alright, Jarv? Not bleeding from his eyes?" Tony dragged a file over, adding a comment to the notes Jane had sent him.

"I can confirm that he is not bleeding from his eyes," Jarvis said. The mechanical voice paused, as if his programmed soul was considering Tony. "Though I cannot account for the complexities of mental states."

Tony sighed. His back was murder as he sat up. "Tell him you'll take a direct message. There's no need for code when I'm in my lab."

Tony rubbed his eyes as Jarvis went silent. The immediate sting of his day had given out to a dull throb of vaguely articulated emotions. All he really wanted was to drop out and immerse himself in the project.

"He says the same thing," Jarvis said.

"The air conditioner is broken?"

"That is all that he would say."

Tony's jaw popped as he opened his mouth, sucking in a deep breath. The computer chair rolled out from beneath him. "I'm coming," he said lifelessly.

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Tony wasn't expecting Loki's proximity to the door when it opened. Tony leaned away, nearly catching himself in the closing door. Loki's eyes darted over him, and if Tony had been in a better mood, it may have been exciting. As it was, it was just unnerving.

Loki's nostrils flared in a sharp breath. He blinked rapidly, assessing thoughts in rapid fire. "Looks like the air conditioner's working," Tony said, interrupting his concentration.

"Your perception fails you," Loki said. He edged Tony closer to the wall, eliminating the few inches that Tony had gained. Stark's lack of reception unnerved him.

Tony licked his lips, glancing at the counter in the center of the room. "You ought to have attended dinner," Loki said. Tony heard nothing but a demand, yet Loki had squirmed inside his head as he offered the words to Tony.

"I'm not up for your mood swings today," Tony said. He shoved his shoulders to the side, leaned off the wall, and put a good amount of space between them.

Loki's hands curled into agitated fists at his sides. "We are in the same position, then."

Tony scoffed, refusing to look at him. "No we're not."

"I am aware of your meeting with Pepper today," Loki said.

"You're a journalist now?" Tony grinned unkindly. He drew his arms up in front of him, crossing them tightly. "Sorry, no comment."

"It is in your best interest to stay here this evening," Loki said. The words sounded desperate in his ears. He agonized over making them sound as demanding as possible.

Tony's eyes rolled towards him in a cruel, impatient glare. "So I get blown off at breakfast when I'm trying but now that I'm busy, suddenly I have to stay?" Tony took a breath. He heard rain pelting against the window. "I'm not here for you to just jerk me around."

Tony knew he sounded harsh. He even knew that this argument wasn't really about Loki. It wasn't. He was angry anyway.

"Nor am I," Loki hissed. "You think you may enter here whenever you wish, while I am denied freedom?"

"I let you out," Tony blurted. "And you know how that ended."

"Yes," Loki said. "A foolish, impulsive act. You completely jeopardized your position with your team and my own safety."

"Well do you want in or out?" Tony snapped.

Loki's eye twitched. He pulled in a slow breath. Tony was right, of course. There was no altering the circumstances. "Perhaps," Loki said. "We could start this day over."

Tony's expression shifted. He closed his eyes, running his hand back through his hair. "If I can skip the middle," he said. Loki took back the space between them. Tony leaned against the wall. It still didn't feel right to him. He felt Loki's mouth brush tentatively over his bottom lip. "I know this is going to rock your world," Tony said, "but it's been a long day." He blinked uncomfortably, leaning his neck back. A pained look crossed his face as he kept his focus on the ceiling. He was definitely not living up to the playboy reputation tonight. A dull roll of thunder sounded outside.

Loki stepped away. He pushed a lock of hair back behind his ear, dropping his gaze to the floor. He heard the thunder and hated it with seething passion. Every time it struck he was reminded of the god that was coming for him.

"It has," Loki agreed. A horrible, off, worthless day by his account, but it seemed better just to agree. Tony let his arms fall to his sides.

"I have some things I want to finish up in the lab," Tony said. He rubbed his palm against his forehead. "I'll back up in a couple hours if you want," he said.

"I'll be waiting then," Loki said. He stepped further away so that Tony could leave. He wandered over to the window when the man was gone, to glare at the narrow slit of life outside. With every stroke of lightning he seethed, checking to be certain that Thor had not appeared. As if that was enough assurance. He was certain that Thor was going to come and ruin things just as they were starting to go well, as he always did.

It was still raining when he crawled into bed, leaving the covers open on the other side for Tony. He had never planned for this to happen, and now that it was, he didn't want to fail. He didn't understand why it had to be difficult. He rolled the day through his mind in melancholy, half angry with Tony and half angry with himself.

Tony came into the dark room wearing flannel pajama bottoms and a cotton undershirt. He held his phone out, using the light to guide him. Loki watched him with alert eyes as he eased into bed, tossing his phone onto the nightstand.

Tony curled onto his side. He was relieved when Loki's arm wrapped around him, pulling him in closer. The smell of the bed and the warm weight against him soothed the tension that had been rattling him all day. He finally relaxed a little. Loki nuzzled against his neck. It brought a wicked smile from Tony. That was new for Loki. Loki didn't move, and Tony relaxed as he thought that Loki was drifting into sleep. "I'm sorry."

Tony opened his eyes at the whisper. It was so faint that Tony wasn't sure if he was meant to hear it or not. His gaze drifted in the darkness. "Me too," he muttered. Loki said nothing, but his fingers tightened around Tony's waist, and Tony had the distinct impression that Loki had no intention of letting go.

Tony could hear nothing but the rain. He fell asleep a long time later, watching lightning illuminate the room, uncertain of whether Loki was awake or asleep.

## Chapter End Notes

*next chapter will be quite happy, promise.*

## Chapter 25

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki woke up to the sound of rain pelting against the windows. A gray, hazy light drifted in through the slatted window.

Tony was awake, and seemed to have been for some time. He didn't notice Loki's eyes open, or the god's lingering stare. Tony's eyes stayed distantly transfixed on the beads of water sliding along the glass. He seemed somber, like he wasn't fighting that weariness he worked so hard to hide under flippant charm.

Loki reached his hand across the bed and softly brushed his fingertips along Tony's cheek. The man blinked, his face shifting into a smile for Loki. "Morning, sunshine." He said it carelessly, stretching his legs in the bed.

"And what of your plans for today?" Loki asked. His hand slid down to Tony's shoulder. He kneaded his thumb in little circles against Tony's collarbone.

"All yours," Tony said, his voice bright. A tiny smile appeared at Loki's lips, but he was not fooled. He had seen Stark's face when the mortal had thought that Loki was asleep. Loki's head felt heavy. He had spent most of the night running from nightmares.

Loki's black hair dragged across the pillow as he rolled more easily onto his side. "You were thinking about her," he said.

"No," Tony said. Loki let go of him and rolled over onto his back.

"Yes," Loki said to the ceiling. He set his hands on his stomach, drumming his fingers. "Why did you neglect to tell me?"

Tony's sigh drifted towards him. "Because I didn't want to think about it," Tony said defensively. "It's over. Does it matter?"

Loki's head turned back towards him. "Yes," he said. Tony frowned, then rolled over onto his back to stare at the ceiling instead. He kicked his legs uncomfortably, twisting in the bed. "You are troubled," Loki said.

"That's sort of my thing," Tony said. "Life story and all." He felt Loki's hand at his shoulder again, fingers cupping around him. "You don't tell me everything," Tony said quietly.

"Not everything is safe for you to know," Loki said. Tony couldn't tell if Loki knew he was lying. Loki's voice sounded so level and calm beside him. "Tony," he said when he did not get an answer. "I altered my own memory and am still paying the price. Perhaps you should consider the implications of that before you accuse me of withholding from you."

Tony closed his eyes for a moment. "That's not what I mean," he said. It might not have been the Avenger thing to do, but Tony didn't have much interest in what Loki could reveal about Asgard's affairs. That was Thor's problem, and Tony'd had enough of other worlds for now. His interests were far more Loki-centric. "Tell me...tell me something about I don't know, anything. What's going on in that head of yours?"

Loki rolled over onto his side, his viridescent eyes drifting across Tony's face. A small, soft smile appeared again. "Presently I'm wondering what goes on in that head of yours."

Tony smirked, then shoved at him with his arm. "That's not a fair answer," he whined.

"What do I get if I tell you?" Loki asked snootily, lying his head back on arms that pointed out at the elbows.

"I'll think of something," Tony said suggestively. Loki hummed, pretending to consider the offer.

Loki glanced out the window. "On a day like this," he said, his voice assuming the timbre of a seasoned storyteller, capturing Tony's attention immediately, "when I was seven hundred and eighty-five," he heard a chortled sound from Tony, "god, Stark, do remember. That is nothing for us." He watched as several drops of water merged and plunged down the pane together. "I had grown tired of studying in the library. I had been working on a spell for many weeks, and yet I could not gather the resolve to finish it."

"What sort of spell, Harry?"

Loki turned over humorlessly, raising an impatient eyebrow. "Forget the reference," Tony said. "Continue."

"As I was saying," Loki said, "it was a day much like this. Though it was raining on the grounds, I decided to go for a walk."

"You? Just strolling around and looking at stuff?"

"Is that amusing to you?"

"Uhh—"

"Stop interrupting."

The rain pitter pattered against the window as the point was made.

Loki sighed. "The rain had been absent for several weeks, and the grounds were unprepared. There was more water than the drains could account for, and pools had collected along the stone paths." He combed his fingers back into his tangled hair. "I noticed after a while that despite this, there was a tiny current in the water. Following it, I discovered one of many ways out of Asgard." He grinned. "They were always there. It was just that no one was looking."

"That one led to Vanaheim," Loki said. He dragged the comforter towards him just a bit.

The bed groaned as Tony rolled back onto his side. Loki glanced up just in time to see Tony leaning over to take his mouth. Loki had a second for his thoughts to catch up, for a flare of anticipation to spark in him.

Loki made a displeased sound underneath Tony, squirming, and the second Tony's lips departed his voice came, "Stark," the name rang impatiently. "Your mouth tastes as wretched as rotting fish."

"Like yours is any better!?" Tony griped right back at him.

Loki turned his head sideways on the pillow proudly. "Of course you think it is," Tony said. "Of course you do." Tony sat up, leaning his weight back onto his hips. He slipped his hand along

Loki's thigh. His heart thudded faster as it triggered a memory.

Loki watched him leisurely, none the wiser. A quiet moment passed between them, composed of nothing but a slow stare.

"Maybe we could remedy this with a shower," Tony said, picking up Loki's hand and examining his lengthy fingers longingly. "I like your shampoo better than mine anyway." Loki's fingers flexed into a curl against his palm.

"Your shower is upstairs," Loki said. "Mine is here." He felt Tony's pulse jump where his fingertips touched Tony's wrist. He tilted his head ever so slightly, his face patient. He could read the crease of worry on Tony's brow better than Tony could understand it within himself.

Tony's stomach churned in an anxious twist. He turned away from Loki, glancing out the window. He was unaccustomed to having his advances rejected. He could only think of one explanation for Loki's distance. "If you don't want to see me," Tony said, his voice dropping like a lead weight, "just say so."

"I am not saying that I do not wish to see you," Loki said easily. "I am telling you that it must be on my terms." Tony's face snapped towards him. Loki took his hand back and rested his head on his arms again. "This may be all that I have left of a kingdom," Loki said in a near whisper. "But I shall rule it nonetheless."

The words rolled slowly through Tony's mind. Loki's toes twitched.

Loki watched Tony's face shift through emotions. The memory of their first night together was the one thing that could ease him back to sleep. *Of course* he wanted to see Tony. It just had to be on his terms.

"So then..."

"You may go get breakfast," Loki said. "And when you return, I shall be waiting." Tony wavered on the bed. Loki lifted up his hand and rested it on Tony's kneecap, brushing his thumb back and forth. Tony's knee slipped out of reach as Tony slid from the bed.

"So," Tony said, stretching his arm over his head, "do you want bagels or..."

"You may choose," Loki said.

Tony nodded his head and disappeared out the door.

Loki let out a sigh, dropping his head down against the pillow. His eyes rolled towards the window.

A pleased, expectant feeling hit his chest. There had not yet been a day where he had Tony entirely to himself.

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Tony wandered into the elevator and slid his finger down the buttons, thinking. The elevator glided upwards with Tony watching each floor progress. He leaned his head back with a sigh.

He brushed his hands across his face in the shower, sending waves splattering down onto the floor.



He kept expecting Loki to toss him aside. He kept bracing for it, even when it wasn't happening. That wasn't Loki's fault.

Tony towel dried his hair, closing his eyes. A slow smile curled up on his lips. He would get today right, he promised himself.

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"Alright." Tony dropped several large bags on the counter. Boxes rattled inside. Tony cracked open a caramel coffee and pushed it towards Loki, setting the lid beside it.

Loki sat up straighter on the barstool, his fingers laced beneath his chin. Tony set a bright pink box in front of him. "This," Tony said, "is the best cinnamon roll that you will ever taste in your life. All thousand and whatever years of it."

Loki smirked. "That's a high standard," he said.

"It's an accurate one," Tony said. He wasn't finished. He took several more boxes from the bag, stacking them neatly. "This is without a doubt the best bakery in the city, and they do lunch." Tony never would've bought quiches and croissant rolls for himself, and Natasha had raised a serious eyebrow when he asked for recommendations, but he had faith in her judgment. "So I can stay in all day with you if you want."

Loki saved his comment until he took a bite. His toes curled as he stuck the fork in his mouth, and it was not a detail that Tony missed. He grinned wickedly. "Gods," Loki muttered, plunging his fork down into the pastry for another bite.

He was wearing gray dress slacks, and a sharp sky blue oxford shirt with the top few buttons undone. He was barefoot, however, and though Tony could tell he'd attempted his luck with the straightener, there were a few wild curls flaring out from the back of his head. Tony bit back on a fond smile and slid onto the barstool beside Loki.

He proudly picked up his coffee, careful not to spill it on his snug t-shirt. "I told you so."

"You may only say I told you so," Loki said, his mouth still a little full, "when you're right. If I find one that's better in two hundred years—"

"You won't," Tony said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"I may," Loki said.

Tony shook his head. "You won't." The coffee was hot and bitter. "Unless you're counting the five others that I brought." Tony pushed one of the boxes towards Loki with the back of his hand. He heard it pop open as he took another drink.

When Loki finished he threw the fork at the ground with a loud clatter. Tony looked down at it with a distinct *what the hell* face. "Dropped it," Loki muttered to save himself. Tony made an odd face at that, but blessedly kept the opinion to himself.

Loki just tossed the fork on the counter after he'd retrieved it and grabbed his coffee like a life raft. He crafted his face back into something regal and unaffected. "You chose well."

"Damn right I did," Tony said.

He nudged Loki's foot playfully. Loki smirked. He took a sip, caramel mingling with the syrupy sugar taste lingering in his mouth. Tony balanced himself on the barstool as he took off his shoes, dropping them beside the counter. "So I have you all to myself," Loki said.

Tony turned over his shoulder, smiling suddenly. "Do you have plans for me?"

Loki smirked, a deviant spark igniting in his eyes. "Are you the only one that's allowed to have plans?" He asked loftily.

Tony laughed, a slow, throaty sound. "And what would your plans be?"

Loki held his coffee up to his lips. He felt its heat rising against his parted mouth. He was utterly unaware of the flush that brushed across his cheekbones. "I don't suppose," he said, staring straight ahead at the kitchen sink, "you might guess?"

Tony felt a surge of endearment. It was fucking criminal, what Loki could be. Did Loki know what he was doing? Tony rubbed his hand against Loki's thigh. "No idea," Tony said, feigning confusion.

Loki slipped into a grin as he recognized the challenge. He took a slow sip of his coffee. "Well," he said, "I thought perhaps checkers." Tony's hand stilled against him. "Then you could organize my books for me. Clean out the sink. Run laundry."

"Wow," Tony said in a dull thud. Then something thoughtful flickered across his face. "Did you clog the sink on purpose that time?"

Loki's nose wrinkled. He took a sip of his coffee. "Did you?" Tony asked. Loki shrugged. "I'm going to take that as a yes," Tony said.

Loki's eyebrow pointed irritably. "It's a yes," Tony said. Loki shook his head.

"So," Tony said. "Checkers." He glanced around the room, looking for the board. It had been tossed long ago. Loki's hand darted out in front of him and felt his coffee cup.

It was lukewarm to the touch. Suddenly Loki batted it like a cat.

The liquid spilled across the counter and onto Tony's jeans. The man jumped in his seat, looking down. "Oh my," Loki said. "How unfortunate." He took a sip of his coffee.

Tony blinked, caught between getting upset and laughing knowingly. "That was deliberate."

"Was it?" Loki asked. He cast a glance towards Tony's pants. "I suppose you'll have to rid yourself of them."

Tony stood up from the barstool. "Hmm," he said. "I think I may need some help." Loki's gaze drifted over towards him, the god's teeth tightly gripping the rim of his coffee cup as he tried not to look too interested. "You did spill it after all." Loki could feel his pulse jump. Tony leaned his hips in towards him.

"So incapable," Loki said, setting his cup on the counter. He could feel the flush in his cheeks this time, and hated himself for it. He yearned to glamor it away. "Must I do everything for you," he said, sliding the button on Tony's jeans free. His pointer finger drifted towards the zipper.

Tony felt his breath hitch as the zipper groaned down. The speed was agonizing. He couldn't wait another moment. His calloused hands reached out for Loki, taking the god's face in his hands. He

stood there, fly undone with Loki's hand uncertainly lingering beside it, Loki staring up into Tony's dark eyes set contentedly upon him. "Okay?" Tony asked, leaning in to kiss him.

Loki's warm breath brushed against his lips, slick with sugar. "Yes."

Tony's hot tongue slipped in past his lips with sheer need, bridled only by Tony's gentle hands. The man's hips bucked towards him as Loki's fingers slid inside his jeans. A warm, confident smile stretched across Tony's lips when he pulled away, his soft, lusty eyes on Loki.

Loki stood up, pushing Tony back towards the bed. Tony fell into the mattress obligingly, wrapping his arms around Loki's back as the god's mouth trailed down his neck. Loki closed his eyes, memorizing the sound of Tony's hurried breath, the smell of his skin, the throaty little sound he made as he rocked up towards Loki. It was making him dizzy.

Tony's hands guided him back towards that hot mouth. He moaned, his fingers digging into Tony's shoulders as the man's skillful tongue stole the last note of caramel from him. When Loki broke away he was panting, holding himself up with one arm from Stark. Tony's warm breath drifted past his cheek. There was a question in Tony's eyes, and then the man reached down his side to free himself of his shirt. Loki didn't let him finish, peeling the shirt from the man and replacing it with eager, open mouthed kisses along scarred flesh and peaked nipples. Tony's needy, encouraging gasps made his head spin. He needed this. He craved Stark, devoured not knowing what to expect. He wondered with impatience what new memory he'd have to replay on the nights that sleep could not take him.

Tony felt a heat rush through him and settle at the pit of his stomach as Loki's dark locks moved slowly down his chest. Loki sat up, breathing loudly, face hopelessly red. The sight sent a slack grin across Tony's face, already sloppy with desire. Loki tugged Tony's coffee stained jeans free unceremoniously. When his fingers slipped inside Tony's boxers, brushing along coarse hair and warm skin, Tony involuntarily thrust towards him. Loki tugged at the offending fabric and dropped it beside them on the bed. Tony's hand found his wrist.

"My turn," Tony said in a ragged whisper, easing Loki onto his back. Loki stared up at him in a twist of debauched blue, the fabric flaring out from his exposed chest in ragged angles. A smoky smile was on his lips, his eyes set expectantly on Tony.

He trusted Stark, he realized, as the man undid a button. Tony's mouth was at his bare chest, fervent but slow enough that Loki could sense his enthusiasm, knew Tony was memorizing the feel of him just as zealously as Loki had. He closed his eyes, arching towards the man.

Tony peeled back the shirt like foil, freeing Loki's arms but leaving it on the bed behind him. Tony grinned as he stared down at Loki, burning the sight of his flushed skin against sky blue into his mind. Loki's hands slid through his hair, fingertips slicking the short scruff back. He could hear his breath in his ears, leaned towards Tony's touch as the man undid his dress slacks. Tony's hands became less graceful as he became more frantic.

Loki felt the silky fabric slip from him as Tony slid the slacks free, standing off the bed as he did. Tony dropped them to the floor with an open hand, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he stared down at Loki.

Loki stared up at him from the bed, painfully aware of the tight erection straining against his undergarments. Tony turned from him, one of the bags rustling as he dug inside. He returned to the bedside with a small bottle in his hand. His voice was soft and low against Loki's ear. "Only if you want to."

Loki wrapped his hands around Tony's shoulders, pulling his chest up against Tony. He breathed in the scent of his hair, woody and citrusy. "Yes," he whispered, dark and wanting into the soft curve of Tony's ear. The word sent a shiver down Tony's spine. Loki moaned loudly as Tony freed him of the last thing between them.

Tony's mouth was right back at his ear, gently taking the soft curve between his teeth and then nipping playfully. Loki gasped and rocked up against him, overwhelming aware of the searing press of flesh on flesh. He heard a snap beside them that he forgot a second later as Tony's hand kneaded against his shoulder.

Loki's breath thundered in his ears. He could feel the god's heart pounding in his chest. "Relax," Tony whispered. He buried his face in Loki's neck. He couldn't look at the god's wrecked face without his head spinning. Tony thought that he remembered how addictive Loki's reactions were, how wonderfully apparent Loki's desire was. He was wrong. It was better.

Loki gasped as Tony's finger rubbed around his entrance, not pushing in. Tony's mouth was at his neck, distracted.

Tony sat up and rubbed his hands down Loki's thighs, his strong thumbs sending flares of heat through tight muscle. Loki glanced up at him with half-lidded eyes, but whatever he'd been about to say or threaten vanished with a needy moan. Tony pressed a light kiss to Loki's hip, delirious with the scent of him.

Loki curled his fingers into the sheets. His eyes fell closed as Tony's finger slid into the tight heat of him. He could hear Tony's voice, a soft string of muttered adoration. Time was nothing, just a blissful slide of consciousness.

Tony took his time, fervently watching Loki's face contort in pleasure. A bead of sweat rolled down Tony's face and fell against his chest. He could barely hear the sounds slipping from Loki's throat above the heartbeat pounding in his ears. He wanted Loki so badly he could hardly stand it.

Pleasure sparked up Loki's spine as an ache grew in him. Stark's fingers weren't enough, not even as they found a sweet spot that made him writhe. He gasped, one hand blindly reaching out to pull Stark towards him.

He sighed as Stark's firm hands found his ankles. The backs of his knees were slicked with sweat as Stark slid them over his shoulders. "Loki," Tony whispered. He opened his eyes to see that Tony hadn't been calling him, just saying his name. Saying his name like it was the most valuable word in the world.

Tony thrust slowly into the slick heat of him. He could feel his resolve crumbling, lust overcoming him as Loki squeezed him tight. Loki's hands were at his back, nails digging in as he pressed his face against Tony and muffled a yell.

Loki could hardly open his eyes, aware of nothing but Tony. He thrust his hips towards Tony, aching to take him deeper. He needed to feel every inch of that hard cock inside him. Tony rocked his hips agonizingly slow, letting Loki feel each motion of his cock deep within him, the friction making him frantic.

Loki writhed beneath him, moaning and gasping. He thrust long and slow, shuddering as Loki pulled him in tight. It was that pull that made Tony crazy, pleasure unfolding in all the broken spaces as Loki wanted him.

Loki stopped thinking, ignored every ache and little pain that whispered through him. Tony was

everywhere at once. He was desperate to stay in that space, speared between pleasure and nothing.

Tony's thrusts became shorter. Faster.

Loki opened his eyes, dark hair twisted around his face and slicked with sweat, just as Tony's face succumbed to orgasm. His moan rang in Loki's ears.

A small smile crept across Loki's flushed face, but he wasn't given time to think. When Tony opened his eyes he grinned, sweat dripping down his forehead. His hand curled around Loki's cock, and it took nothing but a tug and his slick finger sliding across the head for the god to come in his hands, spilling across their chests.

Tony leaned down and pressed his open mouth to Loki's shoulder, still trying to catch his breath.

Loki came back from the high slowly, floating down. He was suddenly aware of Stark's weight, holding him secure against the bed, and Stark's wet mouth at his shoulder. He shivered once and Tony shifted, wrapping an arm up under his shoulder and holding him closer.

Tony glanced down at the crumpled blue shirt beneath them and grinned, burying his face in Loki's neck.

Loki's fingers slowly came up around him, kneading against muscle as the god stared up at the ceiling. Loki's heart was still beating fast. He closed his eyes, his fingers pressing into Tony's flesh, as if it were possible for the mortal to be any closer. Tony tensed for a second at the pressure.

"We've still got the whole day," Tony whispered.

"Mmm," was Loki's answer.

## Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to give a quick thank you to all of you for reading along, subscribing, and commenting. You make this such fun to do. I love hearing what you think and feel about what's going on or what could happen (and please don't feel like you have to agree, good or bad, both are fine). Thanks for making this such a pleasure to do!

## Chapter 26

Loki was facedown on the bed, his arms resting beside his tangled hair. He was wearing Tony's t-shirt.

Tony had watched, intrigued but uncharacteristically silent as Loki fished the clothing from the floor and tugged it over his head without a word. It was too small on him and stretched at the seams. He'd fallen asleep, otherwise bare. Tony's eyes wandered towards that smooth curve of ass beside him. He grinned, impishly glancing out the window, as if he hadn't just been congratulating himself.

He grabbed one of Loki's books from the nightstand and flipped it open. He didn't bother with dressing. Loki had told him to stay. The god had slipped his fingers under Tony's chin, then tucked them beneath the pillow and closed his eyes. Loki had been privately furious that his uncooperative health was robbing them of time.

Tony incrementally glanced up from the book, just to watch Loki's chest rise and fall. His eyes would drift towards the scattering of carryout boxes and bags on the counter before falling back onto the page in a good mood.

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Loki's eyes opened. He saw Tony beside him, engrossed in a book. Loki looked at the stack of pages. Tony was, perhaps, a third of the way through it. He hadn't been asleep that long then. He grinned.

"It is too quiet in here."

Tony almost didn't hear him. He lowered the book down in his lap, glancing over to see Loki staring up at him from the pillow with a flat hand beneath his face. A sly, expectant smirk reached all the way to his eyes.

"May I make a suggestion?" Jarvis chirped.

"That's not—" Tony began saying, only to be cut short by Marvin Gaye. "You snarky bastard," Tony said, suppressing a laugh as it blared. "Turn it off." The music disappeared with an audible, unnecessary click. "I swear," Tony said. "I didn't teach him that."

Loki blinked. It was a slow, pointedly disbelieving gesture. Tony's hand slid alongside his face, his fingers curling beneath Loki's chin. "Feeling better?"

"As ever," Loki said glibly. Hearing the harsh edge beneath Loki's tone, Tony regretted asking the question. He brushed Loki's hair back behind his ear. "I do recall," Loki said, sitting up. Tony set the book on the night stand swiftly to make room for Loki as the god eased into his lap, smirking in an assured way, "you telling me not to let you get away with making me wait."

"You were just sleeping, not waiting," Tony said.

"Same thing," Loki said. He rocked against Tony, brushing his fingertips across Tony's shoulders.

"I also said," Tony said as Loki's tongue found his neck. He nipped in a way that brought Tony

arching towards him, “that I’d make you work for it next time.” His voice cracked as he sucked in a breath.

“Oh dear,” Loki muttered. “However will I do that?”

“I have a few ideas,” Tony murmured. Loki bucked towards him, hissing a wet breath against Tony’s neck as Tony squeezed his ass. “Or do you have a few of your own?” Tony challenged him.

Loki stilled against him. Tony could feel Loki’s breath drifting back and forth against his skin. Tony combed his fingers through Loki’s hair, wrapping his legs over Loki. “You borrowed something,” Tony said.

“Did I?” Loki asked. He dragged himself up Tony’s chest, flaunting the little fabric between them. Tony could hear one of the seams snap in the strain. He raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Tony said. “Yes you did.”

“Take it back then.”

Tony stared at him, his heart stirring in his chest. Loki smirked expectantly. Tony couldn’t decide if Loki was taunting him, or inviting him. He tentatively slid his fingers up hipbones to the edge of the cotton seam.

He slid one finger inside the shirt.

In the next instance Loki rolled out of reach, returning to his side of the bed. A mischievous smirk snagged at his lips. Tony didn’t know what he’d been expecting.

“So that’s how were gonna play this, huh?” Tony asked. Loki shrugged his shoulders innocently. “What is it going to take,” Tony said, straddling down over him, “to get it back?”

“Surprise me,” Loki said.

“As if I don’t already?” Tony asked. Loki grinned, glancing away.

“Do be creative, Stark.”

“Fine,” Tony said. He leaned down against Loki’s ear. He could feel Loki’s pulse jump, hear his breath quicken. He smirked. This would be too easy. “Tell me something you like about me,” Tony whispered. “And I’ll take the shirt from you.”

“That hardly seems like a trade,” Loki said.

“It’s not a trade,” Tony said. Loki could feel Tony’s warm breath against him as he said the words, his hands pinning Loki’s shoulders to the bed. The man’s reckless brown eyes stared right into him. “It’s an ultimatum.”

Loki scoffed, rolling his eyes. “If it is truly that precious to you,” Loki said, “you should offer something for its safe return.” The smug glare on his face vanished with a sudden gasp when Tony’s growing erection brushed past his own as the man leaned down against him.

“Go on,” Tony said against his neck, “tell me.” His skillful tongue found the hard ridge in Loki’s throat. His eyelids rolled closed for a second. Tony felt Loki’s fingers slide into his hair, nails combing grooves into the choppy brown locks.

Loki moaned as Tony found the hollow of his throat, playing at his pulse. His toes tangled into

Tony's abandoned boxers as his leg kicked absently against the bed.

Tony's fingers slipped beneath his shirt again, daring to go no further than the little curve of cotton where shirt met skin. *Oh*. So Tony *did* have the upper hand.

Loki reached to rid himself of the shirt, but Tony's hand wrapped around his wrist. Tony eased it back against the bed slowly, staring down at the sheets instead of Loki's sharp eyes. Tony's hand rested against Loki's chest, slowly trailing down the stretched cotton.

Tony's nail dragged slowly against the cotton edge like fire, sending flares down Loki's skin to the places that longed for the touch that Tony would deny.

Loki glanced up uncertainly into Tony's knowing, wolfish eyes.

A deep, pleased feeling contented itself in Tony's chest as he stared down at the god. He loved this side of Loki. Tony slid a hand under Loki's chin, marveling at the way Loki let him brush his thumb across it, grazing his bottom lip. It was like holding fire in his hand.

Loki smiled dismissively. He shifted against Stark, but that only made the desire and lust flooding his consciousness that much worse. Everything was Tony's scarred skin pressed against his own, smelling of spent citrus and coffee and hints of something burnt and mechanical, all paling in comparison to the scent of sweat and sex.

"Fine," Loki said dramatically. "I'll tell you."

"Oh?" Tony said with a grin that made Loki want to kick him and pull him in all at once.

Tony leaned his face down against Loki's neck, encouraging him. Loki's chest rose and fell beneath him in a heavy breath. The god's fingers scratched softly against his head. "You...are...not dull."

Tony smirked. "And?"

"One, that was the deal." Loki dropped his hands from Tony's head, letting them fall on the black comforter.

"Just one more," Tony said, trailing his nail along the shirt seam again. He couldn't keep himself from watching Loki this time. He bit on his lip to contain the smile that would give his amusement away.

Loki turned to the side, a slight sneer on his lips. "Truly, your ego is a work of art. Is that what you crave? Praise?" He could not understand why Tony was grinning harder at what he perceived as a cutting comment. It was infuriating, if not bizarre.

"Who says," Tony said with a soundless laugh, "I wanted to hear praise?" His finger slipped beneath Loki's shirt, playing suggestively at the coarse trail of hair beneath. "Maybe I just wanted to watch you squirm."

Loki's flat hand came reproachfully at his side, his eyes rolling back even as a stubborn smile tugged at his lips. He didn't hit Tony even a little bit hard, and Tony was laughing too hard to feel it anyway. "Okay," Tony said, rubbing at his eye. "That was fun."

"You are very lucky, Stark," Loki grumbled, though it wasn't nearly as threatening as it could have been.



“I know,” Tony said. He leaned back down against Loki’s neck, his hands sliding beneath the stolen shirt. Loki still flexed at his touch. Tony closed his eyes. He hoped Loki never stopped doing that. “That’s how I know you like me,” Tony muttered quietly.

“Marginally,” Loki said quietly.

Tony hid his smile against the shirt, breathing in through his nose.

Tony was done with games. He pulled the shirt from Loki without a fight, abandoning it beside them on the bed. He slid his tongue between lips that parted eagerly, to a mouth that was graceless but just as wanting.

Tony lost track of time, kept in a haze of skin and wet heat and aching tightness. Loki’s breath slipped down into his lungs. Neither gave the other a chance to breathe that was anything but sparing, punctuated by sharp breaths and pants.

Tony couldn’t have said how long it was between Loki’s hands pushing back his face with a look of nothing but *need* and spreading cheeks as Loki arched down towards the bed, burying his face in a pillow as Tony’s hand massaged the small of his back.

He bit the pillow with a throaty groan, too eager to relax despite Tony’s whispered reminders and the slicked, cold finger that was generous for the sake of being generous. Tony’s thrusts were slower than he thought he would have liked, but Tony’s hands were demanding and bossy in their positioning, keeping him on the edge. He felt the sweat roll from his scalp and stain the thin pillow case.

Tony gasped in a breath through his open mouth, watching a bead of sweat roll down Loki’s back. He was straining to get it right, trying to read Loki’s reactions through his own lusty daze.

He could hear his breathing loud in his ears as he thrust into Loki. He heard the bottle of lube hit the floor and roll after falling from the bed. He tilted Loki’s hips more agreeably, barely hearing the sound he made.

Loki felt his voice vibrating against the pillow as he came, Tony’s hand firm around his swollen cock. He went limp, slumping his legs until Tony caught him, pulling him closer. He let out an empty moan as Tony thrust again, saying something he didn’t care to catch. He glanced at the bed, suddenly aware of the aching sound coming from Tony’s mouth at the same time he saw that his come had completely stained the blue shirt that had been left lying beneath him on the bed.

Tony’s fingers dug into Loki’s hips as he came, muttering nonsense. Loki felt it spill from him and trail down his thigh as Tony’s fingers went slack. He buried his face in the pillow.

When the stars had faded from his eyes, Tony ran a hand soothingly against Loki’s slicked skin. He crawled down onto the bed beside him, massaging his fingers in little circles against Loki’s back. After a while Loki turned his head to face him.

There was a languid, satisfied smile there.

“So,” Tony said playfully.

The bed sheets sighed as Loki rushed to place his fingertips against Tony’s mouth. Loki shook his head minutely, his wide eyes set on Tony. “Don’t ruin it with speech.”

Tony shot him one glare, tinged with sass, before leaning in and pressing his lips to that sly grin. He rolled onto his side, one hand sliding around to the back of Loki’s head. As his fingertips

kneaded against wrecked hair, Loki's mouth contentedly exploring his own, he wished fervently that the end of this day would never come.

## Chapter 27

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki carded his fingers through Tony's thick hair, being gentle enough not to wake the man up. Tony had fallen asleep after eating more than Loki had ever seen him eat at lunch. It surprised him to see the man drift off, his face soft and relaxed in the afternoon light.

Tony always looked at least as tired as Loki felt, if not more. It never came across in the way he spoke, or moved, but it was always *there*. Looming right below the surface like it was waiting for the perfect opportunity to come out. Loki scratched his fingers softly against Tony's scalp, grinning joylessly. There was something about that exhaustion that put Loki at ease, and made him feel less alone. He had his own he contended with.

His attention drifted towards the window and the hazy skyline outside. He wondered how he would've endured these months if Tony had not been here. Thor had chosen this punishment and abandonment carefully. Imprisonment with the very people that had defeated him, in the city that had bested him.

It would've been complete agony, if not for Tony.

Tony with his bizarre confessions at first, and the reckless rawness about him that Loki found oddly endearing. The strange, misguided gifts he brought for Loki to make him feel less imprisoned.

This room was still certainly a prison, he thought, glancing up at the remodeled ceiling. He had willingly returned to it, but only because he was in no state to leave. Without magic, the world would swallow him whole. He had far too many enemies.

Loki rolled onto his side, staring at Tony. A warmth spread across his chest, flecked with contentment. With Tony he didn't feel trapped. Still imprisoned, but not *trapped*.

Oh, Tony. He would never have allowed another in the way that he let Tony. He seldom felt intrigued by others, the hapless mass of morons that they were, let alone endeared. He scooted in closer towards the wonderful mortal. He decided that he had let Tony sleep long enough.

Tony felt something tickle against his nose. He grinned, muttering sleepily. Whatever it was twitched and then hooked around him, morphing into a pair of pliers in his dream. Why had he put pliers on his nose? He was just going to fix Dummy, and it was making it so hard to breathe...

Loki's mischievous green eyes were waiting for him. He heard Loki's soft snicker as he released, wiggling his guilty fingers beside Tony's face. Tony rose to the challenge, making a grab for Loki that was swiftly caught by the god's quick hand.

The light caught around Loki's devilish face like a halo, illuminating stray strands of black hair with a golden sheen. "God," Tony whispered, the word slipping from his mouth before he realized it. Loki grinned, nodding his head against the pillow.

Tony marveled at the way Loki stared down at him as he straddled over Tony, his jagged hair falling across his bare shoulders beside his crooked grin. There was something bright and ravenous in his eyes that made Tony's skin crawl with expectation. Loki ran his pointer finger across Tony's chest, watching as Tony leaned towards it like a magnet.

Tony watched as Loki's eyes drifted from the finger tracing his chest to the bed sheets, and realized that he was looking for something. "It's on the floor," Tony said. Loki sighed, stretching down towards the floor in a way that flaunted his chest. It wasn't intentional, and that got to Tony way harder than if it had been. Unable to find it, Loki got off the bed to find it. He stood back up, smirking down at Tony with the bottle in his hand.

Tony let Loki move him on the bed to the way he wanted him.

Tony rocked his hips invitingly forward, grinning. Loki's eyes flicked between him and the invitation, heavy with lust. The lube bottle cracked open like music. Tony smirked at the way Loki's brow creased with concentration, unable to keep himself from moaning as the first finger slipped in, just from the sheer anticipation for having Loki inside him.

He wanted it more than anything. He wanted Loki to knock the thoughts right out of him, to set him ablaze. He grinned with half-lidded eyes as Loki locked eyes with him, smirking at every twitch Tony's face made as he worked him open, Tony hissing with a thrust of his hips as Loki's fingers found his prostate.

Tony made such beautiful, filthy sounds when he was like this, rapturously watching Loki, waiting. Loki grinned, taking in a deep breath as a shudder crept down his spine. Tony wrapped his legs around his waist, beckoning him, almost begging. Loki leaned down and kissed his open mouth, hot and wet. When he leaned back up Tony was flushed, insistently pressing at the small of his back as Loki's gaze lingered on his slicked, parted lips. It was thrilling to have Tony at his mercy for a change.

Tony's heels dug in as Loki took a deep breath. Loki shoved slowly into the heat of him, a loud groan vibrating from his throat. Tony's skin was like fire in his hands as Tony clenched around his cock, his own erection glistening with precome.

Tony arched towards him as he thrust slowly, eyes rapt on the man coming undone beneath him. He loved the sounds Tony made, and strained to hear them above the sound of blood pounding in his ears.

Tony struggled to keep his eyes open as Loki fucked into him, slow and deep, with a grip that was sure to leave bruises. He loved watching Loki's guard peel back as lust overcame him. He grinned brokenly at Tony, as if confirming that they were both okay. Better than okay. Fuck, Tony could not remember the last person that made him feel this wanted. It was exactly what he'd been searching for. His cry broke in a throaty groan as he urged Loki on. The god's eyes squeezed shut as his lip curled back in a snarl and he thrust.

His frenzied breathing rang in his ears as he dug his fingers into the mattress, catching Loki's eyes. He couldn't put a name to what it was that passed between them in that moment. Something serious, ensnaring.

Loki paused suddenly and Tony nearly whined, watching uncertainly as Loki's right hand let go, cruelly abandoning the skin beneath. His heart thundered as he saw the god hesitate, then look to his eyes for confirmation.

Tony didn't know what he was asking. His mouth was already open, panting. He didn't know what to say. Then he felt one of his hands pried from the mattress, skin sliding against skin, and Tony's heart fucking melted.

He closed his eyes, squeezing that hand back.

It was too close, he had no idea that...

That...

He arched painfully into the mattress. He groaned as that hand held tight and he could feel Loki's cock deep and thick, and Tony was shoving his heels in with everything he had, desperate to take him even as he felt Loki come inside him, his hand going limp. Tony's heart was pounding. With closed eyes he could see nothing, but was aware of Loki's soft chuckle suddenly, and his hand wrapping around Tony's cock.

Loki stared down fondly, deeply pleased to watch Tony come in his hands. At last those feet relaxed against his back, and Loki thought he would pull away slowly when Tony grabbed him suddenly, dragging him down.

Loki flinched, shocked and uncertain at the way Tony's arms were desperately locking around him, his breathing ragged. Loki pushed back, arranging himself more comfortably. His mouth parted with a soft sound as he hesitated, uncertain of which name to use for the man.

Tony's lips found his neck in a way that relaxed Loki just enough that he released his weight down against Tony. He waited, feeling that scarred heart pounding against his own chest. Tony hid his face against Loki, clearly conflicted about something.

He felt Loki's fingers brushing along his skin, easing his attention back. Tony didn't know if he wanted to say it, knew it certainly wasn't a smooth thing to say, but it was gnashing away inside of him.

He felt Loki's warm skin shifting against him, not complaining of the slick between them or the way Tony refused to loosen his grip.

Loki felt his hair fall against his shoulder as he stared down at Stark, slowly beginning to worry. He thought not, but perhaps he had harmed Stark? Perhaps he had done something wrong?

"Stay," Tony whispered, hating himself immensely for asking and dying to say it all the same.

Loki cocked his head curiously to the side, and Tony's eyes slowly opened. There was fear there. "I cannot go anywhere," Loki said softly, hinting at Tony's foolishness.

Tony took a deep breath, blinking slowly as he looked to the side. His gaze wandered back towards Loki again. "That's not what I mean." Loki's lips disappeared in an inward curl, but otherwise he appeared unaffected. "Don't...don't go back to Asgard."

Loki scoffed suddenly, then stopped just as suddenly. His eyebrows rose. Tony wanted him that much?

Loki had thought that he was the selfish one. He'd assumed that he was the one getting the most from this, because it was Tony that made him feel worthy, not the other way around. Correct?

Tony swallowed hard. He should know better than to ask something when hell, he still hadn't caught his breath, but he couldn't keep from saying it either. He couldn't read the look in Loki's eyes. Loki's hand brushed Tony's sweat slicked hair back from his brow. "I am not welcome there," he said quietly. "Nor here. Yet..." He took a slow breath, shaking minutely against Tony. "You cannot mean to keep me here?"

"No," Tony said, the first to break the whisper. He dropped his voice, feeling like he'd yelled. "I just..." He kneaded his hands against Loki's back. Tony would never willingly, consciously take

on the title of captor. He felt muscles relax beneath his touch. “I don’t want you to disappear.”

Loki grinned wryly. “That is quite impossible.” He traced the curve of Tony’s ear. “I have attempted twice before.”

Tony leaned forward to kiss Loki’s collarbone. He didn’t want to continue this conversation now. Perhaps Loki shared the sentiment, because his lips sought Tony’s own. He bit Tony’s bottom lip more than a little possessively, and Tony wanted to laugh, because it perfectly mirrored the way Tony always did it to him.

Tony needed something to hold onto, something to keep the mental chaos from consuming him. He didn't think he could take being abandoned again. He relaxed against the bed, forgetting it. He felt Loki getting hard again. He didn’t have to think about it now.

Loki closed his eyes, delirious with the thought that Tony needed him. He had been feared, and tolerated, and perhaps in an obligated way Thor had loved him, but no one had ever *wanted* Loki. Not like Tony.

Something had changed, something unspoken and irreversible, and it was almost as if they could feel it seeping into their skin.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I have a plan, but I'm curious about what everyone's hopes are for the characters at this point in the story, in addition to how this read for you. And after a very slow build, extra smuttiness was very much in order. ;)

## Chapter 28

Loki dragged his fingers through his wet hair, absent-mindedly combing it. He was hunched over a barstool, waiting for Tony to finish showering so that the man could leave to get breakfast.

“Inform Mr. Stark that he has a call,” Jarvis said. Loki glanced up towards the ceiling. It had been some time since Jarvis had spoken to him.

“Is that not your duty?” Loki replied dryly. The water from his hair was making his shirt damp.

“It is rather urgent,” Jarvis said curtly, “and I am not extended into the bathroom.”

Loki’s face twisted into concerned suspicion as he glanced towards the bathroom door. He could hear the shower running. “Who is it from?” Loki asked.

“Jane Foster,” Jarvis answered. Loki slid off the barstool. Just as he raised his fist to knock on the door, Jarvis spoke. “Ah, it seems that the connection has been severed.”

Loki’s fist hovered millimeters from the door. “Is there not a message?”

“None,” Jarvis said.

Tony heard a pounding at the bathroom door. He was finished showering. He was just standing there and letting the hot water soothe muscles that were unaccustomed to recent strains. He stumbled over himself getting to the door.

Loki’s face was a pinched, anxious sort of glare. Before Tony could ask Loki said, “Jane Foster called.”

“Oh,” Tony said. The shower was still running behind him. Loki blinked as steam greeted his face in its escape from the tiny room. “What did she say?”

“Nothing,” Loki said. He openly evaluated Tony’s face before returning to the barstool. He leaned against the countertop, tapping his foot as he stared out the window. Tony watched him for a second before swinging the door shut.

“She probably just found something,” Tony said later, digging into Loki’s closet. Loki watched him closely with incredulous eyes.

“What is there to find?” Loki asked. His voice sounded level, but there was something brittle beneath it.

Tony shrugged his shoulders. “She was looking into ways to construct a bridge,” Tony said. He pulled a white cotton shirt over his head.

Loki sucked in a breath with a hiss. Tony’s belt rattled as he fastened it. “To what end,” Loki said in a low growl. Tony walked back to the bar, leaning down to grab his shoes.

“What else?” Tony asked. “She wants to contact Asgard,” Tony said casually. He saw Loki’s agitation and anxiety rise out of the corner of his eye. He leaned down to put on his shoe. “It’ll take ages to work out the calculations, let alone build a bridge,” Tony said. “It’s something to do. What’s the harm in letting her try?”

“Tell her to stop,” Loki snapped. Tony stilled, surprised. “Call her now,” he demanded.

“Okay,” Tony said, only because Loki’s sudden demeanor scared him. Jarvis connected the call.

Darcy answered. “Uh...” She said awkwardly. “She’s gone.”

“What kind of gone?” Tony asked.

“Gone gone,” Darcy said. They could hear her take a slow breath on the line, as if she wasn’t sure she wanted to share. “They came,” she said.

“Who?” Loki demanded.

“Is that—” Darcy said uncertainly. Tony shot him a glare that went entirely unnoticed. “Thor’s friends,” Darcy said, certain that she knew who that voice belonged to.

“Did they say anything?” Tony asked.

“They just asked her to come with them,” Darcy said. She sighed. “Look, she was going to call you and say goodbye, but they weren’t exactly up for having a nice chat and stalling. I barely got to say bye.”

Tony glanced over at Loki. He was watching Tony closely, his face morose. “Wasn’t there anything else?”

“Nope,” Darcy said. “Unless you’ve got something.”

“I’ll call if I do,” Tony said. He disconnected as soon as Darcy said goodbye. Tony caught Loki’s eyes, pensive and dark.

“Well, there goes that,” Tony said. Loki’s fingers curled beneath his lips as he thought, staring at Tony a while before turning away. “What?”

Loki licked his lips. “She should never have gone to Asgard.” Tony sat down beside him. “It is dangerous for her there.” He leaned an elbow against the counter. “Foster. Always so meddlesome.”

“Thor’s there,” Tony said, as if that made Asgard perfectly safe for Jane. Loki’s face morphed into a crude sneer.

“Yes,” Loki said in false enthusiasm. “He is.” Loki rose and began to pace the room.

Tony leaned his back against the counter. “Why are you worried?”

“I told you from the beginning that she has exceeded her use,” Loki said. He twisted his hands behind his back as he paced. “Thor has no need for her,” Loki said. “They must have need of her knowledge.”

“I thought you were more advanced tech-wise,” Tony said.

“Asgard is,” Loki replied, his back to Tony. “That does not mean that Foster’s mind is without use. I am sure Thor is weary with his trust. Foster is secure. There are things she is capable of.” Loki stopped just before the steel door. “You should never have encouraged her.”

“I thought you didn’t care about her,” Tony said. It was a challenge as much as it was defensiveness.



"I don't," Loki replied. "She is meddlesome and unwelcome, but—" He paused. "She is important to you." A brief look of pity crossed Loki's face. "The courts of Asgard will never accept her," Loki explained. His tone was patient, indulgent almost. Tony still felt like he was being talked down to. "I may say I would not be surprised in the least should a jealous Asgardian attempt to sabotage her. It would not be the first time one of Thor's interests were targeted." Loki's head turned in profile, and Tony could just make out the narrow wince in his eyes. "And that would be the more benevolent of outcomes."

Tony stood up. Loki paced back towards him. "I cannot fathom what state Asgard is in," Loki said, staring down at him. "I had many plans in place..." He said, his voice fading away. Loki's gaze dropped past Tony to the clothes he was in, so unbecoming a king.

A hateful, hopeless sort of smile flickered across Loki's sullen mouth.

Tony didn't know what to do, so he just stepped in a little closer. It wasn't alright, so he couldn't say that.

"Sir," Jarvis said. Angry irritation swept through Tony. "Steve Rogers is approaching. I cannot circumvent him."

Tony let out a loud, frustrated sigh. "Make up an emergency," Tony said.

"He has chosen to ignore me," Jarvis said. "His estimated time of arrival is thirty seconds." Tony and Loki turned to each other.

Loki scanned the room. His hands landed on Tony's chest. Loki shoved him in the direction of the closet. "No," Tony said. "I'm not—"

"If you will be so generous as to notice," Loki said quickly, pressing his fingers hard against Tony's collarbones, "this room is not gifted with space. What am I to say if the dear Captain wishes to use the lavatory?" Tony's mouth opened in a half-formed snark before Loki shoved him in the direction of the closet. "Be. Silent." Loki said, sliding the doors across.

Tony stood on a pile of clothes, watching through the crack where the two sliding doors met. "Loki," he whispered urgently.

The god ignored him, pacing quickly to the counter. Tony fumbled against the doors, banging them loudly in an attempt to open them. "Stark," Loki hissed loudly. The security door slid open.

Tony sank back against the closet, holding his breath as he watched Steve enter. His heart sank into his stomach. There were marks plainly visible on Loki's exposed neck, marks that Steve would certainly notice. Steve wasn't naive the way everyone assumed. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" Loki asked, and it stung because Tony knew his efforts were in vain.

Steve's back had turned to him, and all Tony could see was his stupid haircut. "Oh, I just think I owe Nat twenty dollars."

Loki inclined his head. Steve walked away from him, glancing in the open bathroom door casually. "How've you been?" Steve asked.

"Fine," Loki said. It sounded pleasant, but Tony knew better. Steve walked past the counter, hooking his fingers in his belt loops. Tony spared a glance to anxiously size up the room. Panic coursed through him. His shirt was rumpled against the nightstand. Would Steve recognize it? Tony wanted to disappear inside the closet. The bottle of lube poked barely out from beneath the bed. Loki's blue shirt was crumpled beside it.

“Have you seen Tony?” Steve asked. Tony couldn’t see Loki anymore through the narrow slit.

“As of yesterday,” Loki said smoothly. “Perhaps you know where he is? I am starved for breakfast.”

“He’s hard to track down,” Steve said. There was an peculiar sort of amused skepticism in his voice. He started walking towards the closet.

“Is he?” Loki asked. “There was something I wished to tell you.”

Steve paused, staring at the closet door. “Yeah?”

“In regards to what you proposed,” Loki pushed a few of the carryout boxes together, as if trying to make them smaller. The place was a wreck. “Perhaps...perhaps I could.”

Steve turned back around. Tony let out a soundless sigh of relief. “I’m not sure that offer still stands,” Steve said.

“Oh?” Loki said. He sounded disappointed.

“Tell Tony I expect him upstairs in twenty minutes,” Steve said. Tony heard him stride over to the door.

“If I see him I shall,” Loki said calmly. The lie sounded convincing even to Tony’s ears, yet Steve just opened the security door. He left without a goodbye.

Loki glanced at the closet. He padded softly to the closet door. With a heavy shove he slid it open. Tony stared up at him from the floor. “He knows,” Tony said.

Loki reached down and grabbed his shirt collar, tugging him up. The man stumbled into him and then suddenly Tony was a frenzy of frantic lips on every inch of skin he could get. Loki let out a pleased sigh, his eyes rolling agreeably even as he pushed Tony away. “Do not be so certain.”

“I know Steve,” Tony said. “He knows.” He tried to kiss Loki again but the god just held him back. Tony was panicking, convinced that he wasn’t going to see Loki again. His thoughts were a flurry of irrational omens that felt immensely real.

“You are displaying paranoia.”

“Loki,” Tony said. He leaned his full weight against Loki, despair plunging down in his chest. “Your neck. He knows.”

Loki’s skin flushed a bit. He stayed annoyed, holding Tony back. The pause gave Tony’s mind room to leap to the next problem. “What did he mean, an offer?” When Loki didn’t answer immediately, Tony stopped. He stepped back.

“It seems,” Loki said. “That the Captain was rather concerned that...my behavior might be...less than agreeable during my stay.” Loki wrapped his arms around Tony’s stiff back like they weren’t in the middle of a crisis. A smirk played at his mouth. “He offered an exchange for my good behavior.”

“And what were you going to get out of it?” Tony asked spitefully.

Loki tilted his head to the side. “I never showed interest in negotiating,” Loki said. “So the term for that was not determined.” He leaned his forehead against the man’s, so utterly stubborn when he

had been ravenous just moments before. Loki grinned, opening his mouth. "I think," he said, "the Captain was rather troubled by the attention you gave me."

Loki said it with obvious pride, deeply pleased with himself and Tony.

Tony felt Loki lean in to catch him as he abruptly stopped holding up his weight. He couldn't tell Loki that Steve had been the one pushing him to visit at first...that Tony had never planned for any of this to happen. He didn't want it to somehow end up looking like it had all been a manipulation. "I..." he said, smiling uncomfortably. "Fuck," he said in a hopeless groan. Loki let go of him.

"I had no interest in playing by the Captain's rules," Loki said.

"Forget that," Tony said. "What are we going to do? Steve is going to tear me a new one..." Tony stepped anxiously past Loki, brushing his arm against his side.

Loki heard Tony's breathing get short and choppy. "Stark," he said. Tony didn't hear him. "Stark," he barked. Tony stood still. "This...this can be amended," he said calmly.

Tony stared up at him in wide-eyed disbelief. "How are you not freaking out?"

Loki brushed his hand across Tony's cheek soothingly. If Tony hadn't been so anxious he would have been thrilled by Loki displaying blatant affection. "It will be fine," Loki said.

He was an excellent liar, and an expert at talking others down from great heights. He had worked Thor out of a tantrum many times over the years. When it suited him, of course. "Stark," he said, playing with the name. "You will go to Rogers. You will not reveal anything that is not proven. You will recall that this is your tower, and you may go anywhere within it that you please."

The steady timbre leveled Tony and gave him something to latch onto.

"And then we will discuss Jane Foster," Loki said.

"Oh god," Tony said. "Jane." He combed his blunt nails through his hair. "I completely forgot about Jane."

"There is little that can be done in regards to her," Loki said, setting his hands on Tony's shoulders. He kneaded them in a perfect rendition of Tony's own technique. The muscle eased. "She is beyond our reach. Now," he said, using the word to spark action into Tony. "Go and set Rogers from your mind."

Tony's wide, soft eyes met his imploringly. He drummed his fingertips lightly against the man's shoulder. His patient unyielding portrayed confidence and reassurance, betraying nothing of the dreadful churn in his stomach. "And then you will bring me a salted caramel mocha, extra cream."

Tony almost, almost laughed. His face felt as stiff as plaster. "Alright," he said hollowly. Loki kneaded his shoulders, smiling with a closed mouth.

"Go," he said.

Tony glanced back at him once as he left through the security door, smiling that trademark grin. Loki forced his mouth up in acknowledgment. By noon the man had not returned.

## Chapter 29

Tony leaned back against the elevator wall, counting his breaths. Loki was right, he assured himself. He wouldn't admit it unless—how would Steve react? Tony could practically see the self-righteous look on his disapproving face, the incessant chatter about responsibility he would spew—the elevator doors opened with a dull chime, disengaging his thoughts.

The common room was empty.

Tony looked around in hazy confusion before realizing that he'd just guessed where Steve would be. "Jarvis?" He called out. "Where is Steve?"

"In his room," Jarvis replied. "There are two messages from him for you. Shall I play them?"

Tony let out a lifeless confirmation. There was one from six in the morning, telling Tony that when he woke up Steve wanted to go to lunch with him. The other was from thirty minutes ago, informing him that Jarvis was malfunctioning. Jarvis relayed that with a self-conscious note of disagreement. "I was only denying him access to Loki's room."

"You took one for the team," Tony said, paying no attention to the words coming from his mouth. He let out a sigh and stared at the doors. "Maybe I'll go screw around in the lab until he comes to look for me."

"That is an option," Jarvis said. Tony glanced at the couch. He decided to throw himself on it instead. He rolled onto his side. Steve's imaginary speech resumed playing through his head. "Sir," Jarvis said. Tony rubbed his face, realizing that he'd fallen asleep.

"Yeah?" He asked, sitting up.

Whatever he was about to say was cut short by the elevator doors rolling open. Steve walked in, dressed casually. He carried a noisy set of keys in his hands. Tony stared at him with bleary, blood shot eyes.

Steve grinned warmly. "Come on," he said. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"The usual place," Steve said. "If you hurry, we might still get there during the breakfast menu." The ponytailed waitress flashed through Tony's mind. He tried to recall her name. Ann? Beatrice? Beth? He wondered if either of them had worked up the nerve to discuss going out. "Come on," Steve said.

Tony stood, stretching. Steve didn't seem to be angry. Maybe he hadn't figured it out after all. The sinking sensation at the pit of Tony's stomach argued otherwise. No. There was no way that Steve would not know.

Steve leaned against the doors, waiting for him. Tony took a stiff step towards him. "I don't care what's on the menu as long as there's coffee," he said.

"I'm sure there is," Steve said pleasantly.

He spent the elevator ride talking about work. There was a training session on Wednesday, and a press conference Thursday, and Clint had taken an assignment in Portland for the next two days.

Tony played along.

When they got to the lobby, Natasha was standing just outside the door. She ignored Tony, directing a wordless question at Steve. "It's okay," Steve said, briefly setting his hand on her shoulder. "I know you have a lot of work."

"Another time," Natasha said, relaxing. She smiled over at Tony. "You two have fun." Steve began walking towards the garage. When Tony turned to look back over his shoulder, Natasha caught his eye just before the elevator closed in front of her. He could not read what was there.

"I'll drive," Tony said.

"You don't have to," Steve said.

"I want to," Tony said, holding out his hand. Steve held the keys out with an open palm, allowing Tony to take them.

Steve shifted right back into their conversation about work the moment the engine started. Tony found his way to the hotel restaurant without directions, mentally noting every time they passed a place where he'd bought food for Loki. He tried to imagine how Loki would react to each one, if he'd turn up his nose or pretend that it was below him while lustfully eyeing the pastries behind the glass counter.

After they'd parked and gone inside, the upbeat waitress from before greeted them. *Beth*, Tony read. She lead them to a tall, private booth in the back. Tony flipped open his menu, acting like he wasn't listening as the two updated their life stories.

Maybe nothing had changed. After all, Steve seemed to be in a really good mood, and it wasn't unusual for him to be insistent about going out to eat together. And Natasha...well, Steve and Natasha got each other on a level that Tony didn't really understand the fine details of. Maybe he had misunderstood.

"Is this seat taken?"

Tony recognized the voice immediately.

He turned to see Rhodey standing beside him. "Are you going to move or what?" Rhodey said, grinning. Tony slid over. "Coffee for me too," he told Beth, who paused her conversation with Steve to take drink orders. "I'm offended that you didn't call to invite me," Rhodey said.

"Yeah, because I really need a lecture on manners from a third wheel," Tony teased back.

"More like a fourth," Rhodey said, grinning as he gestured his head towards Beth and Steve. Tony nodded his head in agreement, vaguely rolling his eyes. He felt better with Rhodey there, less tense. "I thought we were going to meet for breakfast but Steve called to say that someone fell asleep," Rhodey said.

"Steve's an old man," Tony said. "Be gentle with him."

Steve glanced over and subtly kicked Tony beneath the table.

"Tony," Rhodey warned. "Be gentle with him."

Tony made a childish face. He leaned his arm against the table, staring at Rhodey. "I can just take your orders now if you want," Beth said.

When she'd left the table Steve had a little smile on his mouth. Tony mercifully let it go without taunting. "She gives me the senior discount," Steve said proudly, daring them to snark back at him.

"She's probably worried about you dipping into your retirement fund," Rhodey said.

"Good thing I've got all those war bonds then," Steve said.

"Well as a war machine I think I'm entitled to some of those," Rhodey said.

"You're only war machine in your password," Tony said.

"No," Steve said. "That wasn't his password. What was it again?"

Tony pretended to consider, as if he hadn't told that story a million times. "Oh!" He said dramatically. "It was war machine rox, wasn't it, Rhodey?"

"Hahaha," Rhodey said dryly. "You two are hilarious. That never gets old." Their laughter muffled some of his words. "You should start a one act comedy tour."

They settled down just as the food arrived. Tony picked at his omelet as Steve and Rhodey began talking about one of their morning runs. He was thinking about Loki, and what he would tell him about this. He played the conversation in his head. He gave himself credit for nearly all of the jokes and omitted seeing Natasha beforehand.

Tony realized that Rhodey and Steve had paused a fraction of a second too late.

"So Tony," Rhodey said. His voice sounded easy and causal, but Tony could practically feel Rhodey taking a deep breath beside him. "We wanted to talk to you about something."

"Yeah?" Tony asked glibly. His heart raced off but he had a masterful poker face. "If it's about wearing a getup as patriotic as you two the answer is still no."

Steve smiled uncomfortably, briefly hiding his mouth with a curled fist as he turned away. "Tony," he said. "We know."

Tony raised his eyebrows. He wouldn't just give them anything.

"About Loki," Steve said.

"What about him," Tony said. He held onto the thinnest shred of hope. They knew that Loki watched cop dramas, and it was their duty to tell him.

"That you're seeing him," Rhodey said. "Let's call it that." Tony had just enough time to toss him an unimpressed half-lidded stare and form half of a snark about adult relationships before the panic set in. His pulse pounded in his ears. His stomach twisted into thick knots.

Rhodey paused for a moment. He knew that look. Dread flooded him. This was the Tony that he'd met post-Pepper, the one he had thought would leave after a few weeks. He had never known Tony to be so rattled by anything. It seemed unfair, even to him, that after everything Tony had been through the affair was what really got to him.

Tony felt a hand on his shoulder. "You could've told us," Rhodey said.

"Just get the lecture over with," Tony said. The hand slid down his arm and came to rest at the table.

“There’s no lecture,” Rhodey said. Tony was looking at Steve.

“There’s not,” Steve said.

Tony didn’t know whether to let his confusion or suspicion win.

“You live with two spies,” Steve said. “How long did you think you could keep it hidden?” Tony turned his head towards the wall, rubbing his palm against his forehead. “Jarvis hasn’t let any of us near that room for a week Tony. We were going to figure it out.” He didn’t sound accusatory, just tired, like Tony was insulting his intelligence.

Steve looked to Rhodey who shrugged patiently. They waited.

“You told Loki you owed Natasha twenty bucks,” Tony said. “And you...what kind of deal were you trying to make with him?”

“I was only trying to get him to talk to me,” Steve said. He tensed at the antagonism in Tony’s demeanor. “It was when he wasn’t talking at all. I didn’t expect him to bring it up again.” Rhodey rubbed his hand against his chin as he glanced over at Tony. “And I had no idea that you and Loki would be—I wasn’t trying to set you up.” Steve coughed. “I wasn’t some kind of pervert or something,” he said quietly. He was straining not to flush dark red.

Tony’s laughter startled him. It was a broken, relieved sort of laugh that was gone as soon as it had come. “No,” Tony said. “We wouldn’t want America’s golden boy to be like that.”

Steve restrained his reaction. Rhodey spoke up. “You’re not on trial here,” Rhodey said. “We just want you to understand that you can let us know. You don’t have to hide things from us. We’re here for *you*.”

Tony turned slowly towards his oldest friend, abruptly cognizant that Rhodey had never abandoned him. He nodded his head in an awkward jolt. “I know,” Tony said.

Steve rested his head against his fist, looking at Rhodey before turning his attention back on Tony. The self-proclaimed playboy had leaned back against the seat, not really looking at either of them. Tony’s shoulders felt lighter, as if a burden had been lifted from them, and the realization was making his throat tight. He wasn’t ready to look at Steve or Rhodey.

“That said,” Rhodey continued. “Loki is a war criminal with a dangerous past.” Steve stared down at the table, listening. Tony sat frozen. “We just want to be sure that this isn’t...isn’t a self-destructive choice.”

Tony sat up straight. For the first time since he’d sat down he felt a fire spark inside. “No,” Tony said.

“Just,” Rhodey held up his hand. “Let me finish. You’ve been in a bad way since Pepper, Tony, you can’t deny that.”

Tony couldn’t. Rhodey had found him on the bathroom floor. Tony wouldn’t lie to him.

“I just need you to tell me that Loki isn’t one of those choices,” Rhodey said.

Tony smiled with an incredulous scoffing sound. “We trust you,” Steve said. “I wouldn’t have let you spend the time alone with him if I thought you were really in danger.” The serious, authoritative tone he took latched onto a tender, younger part of Tony and forced him to listen. “Tony,” he said.

“It’s not like that,” Tony said. His mouth twitched as he stared up around the ceiling. He crossed his arms against his stomach. “I…” He took in a slow breath. His eyes fell onto the cup of coffee beside him, reminding him of Loki. Would anyone have gone to check on him? “I didn’t think I would feel after Pepper, alright?” His voice was defensive and harsh. Tony tried to find a way to put it that didn’t completely give away how mortified and embarrassed he had been by the affair. He kept trying to cover it up, like it had been his fault. Acknowledging it was difficult. “Loki’s got issues, but so do I.”

“Loki tried to enslave the planet,” Rhodey said. He attempted not to make it sound bitter or judgmental, but nothing could smother the sour tang of those words. “Your issues are not his issues.”

Tony shook his head, setting his jaw. “No,” Tony said. “They’re not.” He sighed. “But I feel happier with him. Our…our issues get along. And I don’t know where we’re going but I want the time to figure it out.” Tony ran his tongue along his teeth. “That’s all I want.”

“Okay,” Rhodey said. Tony glanced up to find Steve watching him. The Captain nodded reassuringly.

“Alright,” Steve said.

“Who knows?” Tony asked.

“Natasha, Bruce, Clint,” Steve said, the last name dropping a little heavier than the rest. “We won’t tell Fury, or what’s left of Shield.”

Tony blinked slowly, letting his head fall back against the booth. “Jane was taken by Asgard,” he said. “They came this morning.”

“What?” Steve blurted. Rhodey took a deep breath.

Quietly, little by little, Tony began to fill in the last few months for them, stopping only when Beth came by with refills. When he’d finished they sat in heavy, contemplative silence. Rhodey took a long sip of coffee. “We’re going to figure this out,” Steve said.

“How?” Tony asked. If Loki hadn’t, and he hadn’t, then there was no way that it could be done.

“As a team,” Steve answered simply. He took out his phone and began texting. “Are you up for a meeting?” Steve asked Rhodey when he looked up.

“Yeah.” Rhodey drummed his fingers against the table, thinking.

Tony’s throat was getting tight again. He hadn’t expected the whole team to assemble for Jane or him. “Hey,” Rhodey said. He pointed to Tony’s chin. “You’ve got a little bit of something—” Tony wiped his mouth. “Nope. You should probably go to the bathroom.” He stood up so that Tony could get out.

Tony swung open the door of the bathroom, and took a cursory glance at the stalls. It was completely empty. He walked up to the mirror. He couldn’t find what Rhodey had been pointing out. He checked his teeth, but they looked fine.

Tony took a deep breath. He looked wretchedly tired, but he couldn’t deny that there was something brighter about him. The realization that he could let go of the secret he’d been holding hit hard. He was ready to collapse into bed.



When Tony came walking back towards the table, Rhodey and Steve were arguing over the check. It seemed that Steve had conspired with Beth to win. She brushed past Tony just as he got to the table. "Let's go," Steve said, tucking his wallet back into his jacket. "You've got the keys."

"Okay," Tony said. As he walked out into the parking lot he was hardly aware of his feet hitting the ground.

## Chapter 30

Steve didn't say anything interesting the whole drive back. He talked about baseball and some sort of story that vaguely involved Howard Stark that Tony half-listened to. It was unusual for Steve to bring up Howard, but Tony wasn't giving it much thought. He ran a red light trying to get back and check on Loki.

When they arrived, he had a murky sort of sense that Steve had been trying to communicate something important but he forgot the moment he stepped inside.

"We're going to the conference room upstairs," Steve said, correcting him. Tony turned down a separate hallway.

"I'll meet you there," Tony called back to him.

Steve watched him vanish with an uncertain frown. He was still standing there a few minutes later when Rhodey arrived, distracting him. "You should've let me pay for lunch," he said. "That's why I sent him to the bathroom. I didn't want to argue with him."

"You should've been faster," Steve teased him. It was weak and half-hearted. "Do you think it went alright?" He asked dimly.

"I don't know," Rhodey said. He tucked his hands into his pockets. "I'm glad you set it up like that, though. I think Tony appreciated you not getting mad."

"It doesn't mean I'm not mad," Steve said. He turned to face Rhodey. "But I'm not going to press it. I...Tony does seem happier." He brushed his hand against his jeans. He was struggling to reconcile the idea of trusting *Loki* and the recognition that Tony was happier. "I can't protect him," he said finally. "He's got to figure things out on his own."

"He just needs some space," Rhodey said, sounding mildly less convinced than Steve. He started walking towards the elevator. "I was thinking about sending an investigative team over to Ms. Foster's," he said. "I figure it might give us something to work with."

"We could send Nat over. She wouldn't leave a trail," Steve said.

"Ms. Foster is high profile," Rhodey said. "Her disappearance will be noticed."

As they were debating their options, Tony was throwing open a security door.

Loki was eating a cinnamon roll with a fork. His eyebrows rose in surprise as Tony stomped in. Loki pulled the fork from his mouth, chewing a rather large mouthful.

"They know," Tony said. "And they're *fine* with it," he said, immensely skeptical. Somewhere during the ride home he'd let his doubts turn on the relief he'd felt and destroy it.

Loki set the fork down on the counter slowly with an elegant hand. Its gentle clink echoed in the tiny room. "I know," he said, squaring the fork with the counter. Tony's breathing sounded hurried to him. His back tensed.

"What do you mean you know?" Tony asked.

"They came by with lunch," Loki said simplistically, pointing to an empty container of Thai food.

"It was good. You should bring things from that place."

"Who are *they*," Tony demanded, feeling betrayed by the unperturbed vibe Loki was giving off.

"Romanov and Banner," Loki said. Tony's eyes narrowed. "For lunch. And to assert that were I to have any malicious intentions towards you, they would not allow such manipulations to go unpunished." Loki picked up his fork again. He purposefully avoided Tony's gaze. "I would have found it endearing under other circumstances. As it is, it was simply a nuisance." He carved a generous bite from the pastry. "As if I need to be reminded," he muttered.

He felt Tony standing at his side before he saw him. "Do I need to say something to them?" Tony asked, his voice climbing.

Loki finished chewing before answering. "The concern of your comrades," Loki said, "rather denotes that they are not complete half-wits. It would not be the first time in history that a prisoner seduced their guard into letting them go free." Loki stabbed at the cinnamon roll. "You and I, however, do not have that arrangement. I assured them as much."

"But," Tony said. "We agreed it was better for them not to know about it."

"Yet now they do," Loki said. He reached forward for his cup. "That cannot be changed," he said, taking a sip. He wrapped his fingers around it, soaking in the warmth.

"Did they do anything," Tony accused, rather than asked.

Loki took another sip. The calm, eased aura around him wasn't rubbing off onto Tony in the least. "The only part of this situation that has changed is that they now know," Loki said. "This is a small space. It was rather inevitable."

"Inevitable," Tony repeated.

"Yes," Loki said.

"I had Jarvis working on every smoke screen imaginable," Tony said. Loki glanced at him with a look that said something like, "congratulations, you tried" or "that was nice of you to attempt but what could you expect?" He said nothing aloud. "Loki," Tony said.

"Foster is the more pressing issue," Loki said. "I believe I may have worked out a reason for their taking her."

For the first time since entering the room Tony closed his mouth. "They're close," Loki said. Tony's brow furrowed. "They must think that they have found the All-father."

Loki's posture curled in with disgust and contempt. He flopped the fork against the cardboard tray. "Perhaps they hope that she can find a way in."

Tony blinked, absently touching his chest where the reactor had been. "Where is he?"

"If I knew that," Loki said, "I would not be in this predicament, now would I?" The nasty slick in his tone caused Tony to step back defensively. "I can only have faith that I hid him well enough."

"He's alive then," Tony said.

Loki stared distantly at the cabinets. "Perhaps," Loki said. "Perhaps not."

Tony watched him, only half aware of Loki's veiled anger over Asgard. His own anxiety was more

pressing. "We're having a meeting," Tony said. "About Jane and her surprise holiday."

"Then I hope you happen upon some solution," Loki said. Tony couldn't discern whether he was sarcastic or sincere. Tony's foot scraped against the floor as he dragged it in the direction of the door. "Do not," Loki said, "overburden yourself." Tony stood still, searching Loki's face for meaning. "Your comrades's knowledge of our standing is irrelevant."

"How," Tony said, "can it be irrelevant?"

"They cannot interfere," Loki said, "and I place no value in their opinion on the matter anyway. It is simply inconvenient."

"They could move you to a different facility," Tony said. "They could do it on a day when I'm not here, they could—"

"They will not," Loki snapped.

"How can you be so sure?"

Loki stared Tony down, noticing the cold sweat gathering just perceptibly along the man's hairline. Tony really had no idea. The only concern of his comrades was him. It was like a maddening obsession of theirs, a compulsive loyalty that Loki had never known first hand. Certainly they viewed Loki with varying degrees of suspicion and tired contempt, but they cared for Tony. That Loki was certain of, and if he had not cared for Tony himself, it would have been the first thing he extorted in unfavorable circumstances.

"This is well, is it not?" Loki asked. "They have no reprimand for you and seem content with leaving me be. I see no conflict."

"Loki," Tony pleaded.

Loki patted the barstool beside him. Tony ignored the offer. "Stark," he said, command pooling into the word, "must you make an issue where there is none? As you have said, they are fine with it. I sincerely doubt that they wish to move me to another facility, or inflict injury upon me."

"You don't know Natasha or Clint," Tony began. He'd forgotten, and the dark look on Loki's face was an embarrassing reminder.

"I know what they are capable of quite intimately," Loki said. He saw the adam's apple in Tony's throat bob as he swallowed. It was then that Tony realized he wouldn't be seeing Clint until the archer returned, and it was unlikely that he'd be charmed at the idea of Tony and the god that brain washed him.

"Right," Tony said gruffly. "Well." Loki turned back to playing with his fork. "Don't you find it a little suspicious?" Tony asked. Loki made a noncommittal sound in the base of his throat. "I mean, I at least expected something from Steve." When Loki did not comment, Tony distantly glanced around the room. "I should be getting to that meeting." He hesitated for a moment and then leaned over to kiss Loki on the forehead. The god took it in stride, sitting still. He recoiled inside from the anxiety in Tony. "I'll be back," Tony said quietly. Then he left.

He hadn't planned this, Loki thought bitterly. He turned the cup around in circles between his fingers. He might not have shared Tony's anxiety, but it wasn't his comrades accepting and supporting him. He envied Tony.

It had been a mild surprise to see Romanov stride inside the room, but Banner was unexpected.

They had calmly set lunch out as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. Banner had only stayed for a short while, and Loki had the impression that while Banner was not actually supportive he had no intention of expressing it aloud.

Natasha had stayed until her phone buzzed. The congeniality had slipped from her face as she rose from the barstool and leaned down beside Loki. "If you're just fucking around with his head for your own amusement," she whispered into his ear, "I will carve you apart in ways that even you will find creative."

Loki had grinned something feral, but Romanov did not see it as she let herself out with a cheerful see you later.

With a spiteful smile, Loki wondered how Thor would react to the news.

He remembered his days as king with resentment. Loki knocked the cup over with a flat hand and watched the liquid spill across the counter.

If he got out of this, when he got out of this—what then? He had a terrible time imagining any sort of future outside of this space at all. Loki dragged his finger through the spill. He flicked it. The liquid splattered across the empty containers.

He stood and paced towards the window. Loki leaned against the wall, staring listlessly at the city beyond.

Was it possible to start again?

He tapped his finger against the window. His magic would not heed his call, and he was beginning to doubt that it ever would. He knew it would, logically, but the feeling wasn't there.

And if it didn't return, what then? What was left for him then, if Asgard did not claim him? And if it did? What would Asgard make of him? This room was infinitely preferable to *that*.

Loki braced his arms against his chest as his face set stiff. Slowly, that picture of the future was beginning to include more and more of Tony, and Loki wasn't sure that he could accept that. He felt his lips tug upward at the thought of Tony and pushed them back down. The throne was what was supposed to make him happy.

He stretched his hand out against the glass, studying the glow of that foreign sun against his pale skin.

He wished that Tony would return. Then he could run his fingers through that hair and forget about this. A tremor struck his hand. He took it away, wrapping it inside the other hand. He wished that he'd soothed Tony into staying. It was so much easier not to think about how things had gone wrong when Tony was there.

Fortunate, radiant Tony who was so enviably oblivious to the empire around him. It wouldn't be long before the man grew tired of a failed god like him, he thought with self-loathing. Loki tapped his fingers against the glass, furious with the magic that would not answer him.

All that he had was this room, and the hope that it would be enough to keep Asgard out. With a huff of breath he grinned sorrowfully at the floor. Maybe he deserved no better than to live out his remainder in locked rooms. Maybe this was all that an unworthy monster like him deserved.

Loki began pacing the room, too mindful of how Tony would react to tear it apart the way he wanted. He thought to ask Jarvis for the man's whereabouts several times, then dismissed it as

mewling and needy.

Eventually, he sank numbly into the bed. He stared up at the ceiling where several floors above, a meeting on Jane and Asgard was letting out. Tony was racing to catch up with Steve. He was grabbing him by the arm in a long, dark hallway.

## Chapter 31

“Wait,” he heard. Steve stopped, turning just as Tony caught his arm. An annoyed silence followed. Tony released him, forcing a grin.

The smile twisted into a grimace. By all standards, the meeting had gone well. As well as a meeting that consisted of empty speculation could go. That meant nothing to Tony. “He doesn’t know anything else about it,” Tony said.

“I know,” Steve said. One eyebrow lowered inquisitively before the blonde reminded Tony, “you said that he didn’t.”

“But I’m not lying,” Tony said.

“I know you aren’t,” Steve said.

Tony’s lips twitched. “Loki’s not lying to me. And I’m not saying that because we fondled, Steve.” The words came too fast and anxious to be as playful as they were meant, and they were only met with an impatient eye roll from Steve.

Steve said with exasperation, “I didn’t say that he was.”

“I think we can all agree that if Loki knew a way out of this, he would take it. He’s smart. Not a genius like me, does Asgard have an MIT?” Steve mentally traced the outline of the fire exit glowing at the end of the hallway as Tony’s chatter continued. “Probably not,” Tony answered himself. “But if they did, he’d go, alright? I’m not letting him get away with lying to me because we’re—” Tony’s arms flailed in an awkward motion that just got a heavy sigh from Steve. Tony was crude when he wanted to be. Steve wasn’t sure why he was holding back now.

“If you say so,” Steve said. He had things to be getting to, and if Tony was done insisting, Steve wanted to get moving. He had rearranged his entire day to make room for the unexpected meeting.

“I do say so,” Tony said. His voice lowered aggressively. “Steve.”

“Okay,” Steve said, shrugging his shoulders. He took a step towards the end of the hall.

“Oh, so that’s how you’re going to play it?” Tony asked, his voice shooting off. Steve’s eyes rolled towards the ceiling in a silent plea to a higher power. “Passive aggressive until I hand over my report card myself, right?” Steve took a slow, deep breath.

“I am not,” Steve said tensely, “being passive aggressive.” He looped his thumbs through his belt loops. “Now if we’re done here—”

“We’re not,” Tony said. “Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

“Going on with what?” Steve asked in tired confusion. It gave way to irritation. “What is wrong?”

Short, shallow breaths shook Tony’s chest. His face pulled tight into a glare. “Just have it out, Steve. I’m not going wait around for it. Just say it.”

“Say what?”

“It,” Tony said. He could feel his nails cutting into his palms but didn’t pay it a second thought. Steve took a step back, his cold blue eyes set on Tony.

“What?” Steve asked. He couldn’t help clenching his jaw. Tony’s anxiety made him nervous.

“Just say it already,” Tony said. His shoulders slumped forward as he crossed his arms. “I know you have something to say. Don’t make me wait around for it.”

“What?” Steve asked. “That I’m upset with you for keeping it from me?” The stern, quiet question didn’t antagonize the way Tony wanted it to. It would be better if Steve would just yell. “Yeah,” Steve said. “I’m upset about that.” There was just enough of an edge in his voice to give Tony the feeling that he could get angry.

“What was I supposed to do?” Tony asked. He didn’t give Steve a chance to answer. “Like you were ever going to be supportive of it.”

“Who said we’re not?” Steve’s face twisted into an incredulous scoff that he hid as he pressed his hands to his face, taking a deep breath. He smiled then. An exasperated, despairing smile. “I have given you nothing but support,” Steve said. “I’ve never told you not to visit him, I’ve never reprimanded you for anything regarding him.” Steve’s mouth flinched. “Did I keep an eye on you at first? Yes. I was concerned,” Steve said, hitting the word with emphasis. “He’s a war criminal, Tony, did you forget that?”

Tony said nothing. They were finally getting to the words he expected to hear.

“No matter how he feels about you now,” Steve said, “he wouldn’t have thought twice about killing you in the beginning. So yes, I kept an eye on you. I won’t apologize for that.” The Captain crossed his arms tightly against his chest before letting them drop again. “But,” he said, a little softer. His tone shifted into something patient and faintly parental. “I want to trust you with making your own decisions. I know what you’re capable of, Tony. I trust you to figure it out.” The tension in Steve’s chest faded. “You can trust us, Tony.”

Tony didn’t like how the conversation had gone. He couldn’t accept Steve when the Captain got like this. He needed Steve to yell, to go along with the script in his head. “And when Loki gets out?” Tony challenged him. “When Thor returns? What then?”

Steve thought twice before giving Tony something else to play off. “I don’t know,” Steve said. Tony was still set on a fight. Without giving Tony another chance to provoke him Steve said, “But we’ll figure it out together.”

Steve dropped his voice to a stern confession. “I’m trying to keep the Avengers together. I’m trying to work out the aftermath of Shield and keep Loki hidden *and* plan for Asgard. I’m volunteering at the VA.” Steve licked his lips. “And I’m trying to be there for Bucky’s therapy.”

Tony’s gaze dropped down to the floor. He couldn’t think of the last time that Steve had talked about himself. There must’ve been a time, surely...

“If I’m upset,” Steve said, “it’s because I’m burnt out on watching you suffer when I know the man you can be. Are.” Steve looked away, frowning. “Take the time you need. Figure things out with Loki. I’m not standing in your way.”

Tony shoved everything Steve said aside but the one thing that aggravated him. He loathed Steve’s faith. He yearned for Steve to yell, to say all the things that Tony expected. It was better than waiting to be blindsided. There had to be something, anything, that was being kept from him. There just had to be. “Quit holding me up like I’m some sort of hero,” Tony said.

Steve combed his fingers back through his hair. “You are one,” Steve said plainly. He’d had



enough. He couldn't stand there anymore and be a part of Tony's self-provoked suffering. Tony was staring at him, breathing too hard, anticipating. "I don't know what you need Tony," Steve said softly, "but I wish I could give it to you."

With that Steve turned and left down the hall, leaving Tony standing there to relive a scene from another time in another hallway.

Loki didn't sit up when the door came open. Hurried footsteps rushed into the room, followed by a jangling thud beside his head. Loki turned his head on the counter to stare at a six-pack of beer. He glanced up at Tony.

The gears were spinning in the man's head, taking in his absent welcome and lackluster acknowledgment. "What happened?" Tony asked.

The arms cradling Loki's head obscured his face. He blinked, uncertain whether he wanted to say anything at all. "Who did what," Tony demanded. Loki shook his head.

"Your comrades have not deigned me worthy of another visit," Loki said.

Tony thought for a moment and then picked up a bottle by the neck. He cracked off the cap with a bottle opener and slid it over to Loki. The god let it bump into his arm and ignored it. Tony helped himself to another. "I think I fucked up," Tony said. Loki stared at him. "I—might have fucked up things with Steve." He dropped a bent bottle cap onto the counter. It spun with a dull metal roll. "Maybe I'm pissed at Steve. I'm not sure."

"But what's new," Tony said drably. Loki flicked the cap off the counter. It smacked into the wall. Tony's stomach flipped as he watched it fall. "What's the story, morning glory?" He asked, prodding Loki.

Loki closed his eyes. "I grow tired of this room," he said. He felt Tony's warmth as the man slid onto the barstool beside him.

"Maybe," Tony said. "I can push my luck and jailbreak you out."

"No," Loki said.

"But I tho—"

"Can I not detest this captivity and appreciate its advantages?" Loki let his words bow under the full weight of contempt. "The last room meant for Banner kept Thor contained. Perhaps this can keep him out." Loki felt Tony's hand rest against his back. A soft heat bloomed in the spot. Tony worked his hand in small circles.

Tony took a drink with his free hand. "My plans have gone awry," Loki said miserably. "Perhaps I have lost the ability to plan."

"Nah," Tony said, working his fingers in little circles. The warm, soft cotton moved with his fingers. "Besides, plans aren't everything. I've had way better luck winging it. Planning it is where I've screwed up."

Loki watched him take a sip with guarded affection. He groaned when Tony's hand dropped away. Tony set it back a moment later. "It is a frustration," Loki said. Tony hummed in agreement. Loki had been referring to something new. "You," Loki said. "Are so utterly new, and that is—"

fascinating. And that is...frustrating.”

Tony turned and grinned. It was a prideful sort of grin, like he'd heard that sentiment before. There was a haze in his eyes as he started on another beer. Loki glanced at the bottle disdainfully.

He had no interest in the bitter water. It paled in comparison to anything on Asgard. Tony's hand slid from his back and joined the other on the bottle. The man had kicked off his shoes. He slid his socks against the metal pole of the barstool, failing to find a hold.

Loki stared listlessly into the room, vaguely placated now that Tony had come. The easy, faintly troubled silence reminded him of their first few weeks together. He should have realized what was going to happen between them from the beginning.

Minutes crawled by before Tony spoke. “I don't think,” he said, setting down an empty bottle, “I've been myself much. Lately.” He sighed, and glanced at the six-pack, unenthusiastically entertaining the idea of another. “I think I...” He turned his head to look at Loki. His head had never left the countertop, but his green eyes were set on Tony. “Forgot,” Tony said softly. “I—” He had lost the idea.

He stood up from the stool and set his hand on Loki's back. “Let's...” He let the word trail off. Loki rose, balancing himself against Tony's shoulder with a sleepy hand.

Tony laid down on top of the covers. It felt familiar, and safe. He remembered watching television together. His head sank against the pillow as he watched Loki lower himself with rigid hesitation, uncertain of what the man expected. Finally Loki rolled onto his side, facing Tony with restrained interest. A sorry smile lifted up the corner of Tony's mouth.

Loki's attention went to his fingers. He waved them up and down, examining them. He tried to emit a green spark, but nothing happened. Tony only understood the desperate disappointment on Loki's face. “Hmm,” Tony inquired.

“I...” Loki rolled over onto his back. He glared at the ceiling. It was better not to say anything at all. The truth had never served him well. His body jumped, not recognizing Tony's hand for a split second as it came to rest against him. He relaxed, turning his head away from Tony as the man kneaded his fingers against Loki's arm.

Tony spoke in a near whisper. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Loki said, hating himself. Tony only pulled in closer, drawing Loki into his arms. The god's body was tight and rigid. Tony pressed his lips against the back of Loki's neck, sending a shuddering spark down his spine.

“Tell me,” Tony said.

Loki glared at the closet doors, fighting between the urge to snap and let his anger fend off Tony and the alluring ease of the man's warm flesh against him. He was weary. He chose the later. “I am unaccustomed to...having a body that does not...heed my wishes.”

Tony closed his eyes. “I've rebuilt this one a couple of times,” Tony said. “And I've never heard any complaints from you.” Loki's chest expanded with an unspoken laugh in his arms.

“You'll get your mojo back,” Tony muttered. Loki's hand gently smacked against him as the god rolled over to face him, breaking out of Tony's grip. He reached out and stroked his long fingers against that choppy scruff of brown hair. It was easier with Tony there. The man smelled of smoke and cologne, but Loki could not have cared less so long as it was Tony.

He wanted the wretched day to leave them. He wanted to tear it apart and feed its bleeding heart to the misery that had plagued them. He wanted Tony to himself, and he wanted to forget everything else until he felt nothing at all.

Tony's hand slid around his wrist. The man kneaded Loki's palm. He was exhausted, and Loki had never touched him so tenderly. He didn't want to move or say the wrong thing and make it stop. He closed his eyes, soaking in the sensation of those nails meandering along his scalp. He had done everything wrong today but this.

Exhaustion claimed him as he laid there, comforted. The sheets whispered as Loki dared to move closer, wrapping his leg possessively against Tony. He muttered something in Asgardian that Tony only understood the tone of. Tony grinned softly, not opening his eyes.

Loki felt his hand tugged and watched as Tony slowly brought it to his lips, planting a soft kiss on the palm of his hand. Tony did not open his eyes or say anything. He just gently kept his hand there as he drifted into sleep. Loki's stiff surprise crumbled. A slow, pleased smile pulled up the corners of Loki's lips.

He didn't have to hide the smile, not when no one was watching. He let it curl up and take his mouth the way it wanted. He fell asleep not much later, his hands going limp in Tony's hair.

## Chapter 32

Tony opened his eyes to see Loki beside him, asleep. Long locks of black hair twisted around his neck and across his face. He stayed still in dreamless sleep. Tony sat up slowly.

A fluorescent light had been left on over the counter. Tony pulled his phone from his back pocket. It was one in the morning.

He tiptoed over to the bathroom and held his breath as he pulled open the door. He wondered if Loki could hear the water running. Tony rubbed at his bloodshot eyes, avoiding his haggard reflection in the mirror when he washed his hands.

Checking that Loki was still asleep, Tony padded over to the counter. It was littered with empty boxes, cutlery, and what was left of the six-pack. He bent down to the mini fridge and gently pulled open the door. He was relieved to find water. His thirst was insufferable.

Water dripped down his chin as he gulped the bottle down. He set the empty plastic container on the counter with a soft crunch. Loki had not stirred once. Tony went over to the light switch and plunged the room into darkness with a soft tinkering sound from the fluorescent light.

Only the slat of murky city light from the window shone in. Tony set his phone down on the nightstand and crawled back into bed. He could no longer see Loki's face. He saw only a dim outline of his silhouette.

Some of the covers had come undone. Tony tried to ease down into them, jostling the bed as he did. He heard a disagreeable murmur beside him. Loki's hand met his shoulder. Not fully awake, he muttered something Tony couldn't understand. Tony stilled, waiting for Loki to settle. When he thought that the god had fallen back asleep, he shoved the covers in his direction, wrapping the warm comforter around both of them.

Tony fell back asleep with a dim headache.

"Mrhmmph," Tony muttered. The hand at his shoulder was insistent. Tony buried his face into the pillow, unwilling to get up.

"Stark," an unyielding voice said. Tony cracked one eye open. There was daylight in the room. Loki grinned on one side of his mouth. Tony closed his eye. "Wake," Loki said, jostling his arm a bit harder.

"What?" Tony grumbled, shielding his eyes from the light with his arm.

"Feed me," Loki said. A soft snicker escaped Tony's lips. Loki had just reminded him of the plant in Little Shop of Horrors. "Does my starvation amuse you, Stark?" Loki asked lightly.

Tony sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He still had a headache, and his mouth was dry. "Fine," he said. "But I'm just going to get something from the kitchen."

Loki watched with an expectant, slightly self-impressed stare as Tony rose from the bed. The man's shirt from yesterday had wrinkled, as had his jeans. Tony walked stiffly towards the security door and opened it with a half formed sentence about pop tarts.

When he was gone, Loki rolled over in the bed and stared at the ceiling. He was counting on Tony to keep him distracted. He'd woken up stir crazy in the room.

Upstairs, Tony removed the coffee maker from the wall and hooked the handle of a half of a gallon of milk onto one of his fingers. "Do you want some help with that?" Rhodey asked with pointed judgment from the table. Tony shook his head. Rhodey looked back down at the cards in his hands. He tossed one onto the table.

Steve groaned. Tony could hear him shuffling through a fat stack of cards as Tony tucked a box of cereal under his arm. "That's my cereal," Natasha said playfully, turning around over the back of her chair.

"Not anymore," Tony said. He glanced at the game the trio was playing. "Uno," Tony said. "Really."

"You're just bitter because you always lose," Steve said without looking up from the table.

"I lost on a technicality," Tony said.

"There are no technicalities in Uno," Natasha said. She grinned smugly. Tony sighed dramatically. His arm ached under the weight of the coffee maker he was stealing. He adjusted it against his side. He could still hear their friendly bickering when he stepped into the elevator.

Loki had changed clothes, made the bed, and cleared the counter before Tony returned to stay distracted. Tony found it a little strange that Loki would bother, but he wasn't complaining as he dumped the coffee maker on the counter. Cereal spilled onto the floor as the box came loose in his arms.

Tony tossed the box onto the counter. Loki took the milk jug from him, smirking. When Tony bent down to plug in the coffee maker, Loki flicked a piece of cereal into his hair. Tony didn't notice. Loki watched impishly, hiding another piece in his hand and waiting for the perfect opportunity.

As Tony slumped onto the barstool, Loki set another piece in his hair. He dropped his hand to Tony's neck, pretending that his intention had been to trace his fingers there all along. Tony groaned. He closed his eyes. Loki contented himself with precariously stacking pieces in Tony's hair.

He poured Tony a cup of coffee to keep him still. Tony took it appreciatively, thinking that he was being doted on.

"I shouldn't be drinking this," Tony muttered. It would only make the headache worse.

"Here," Loki said, swapping their drinks. Tony took his water. Loki held his breath as Tony tipped his head back, taking a sip. The cereal stayed.

Loki grew bored of the game as Tony sat there quietly, only half awake. He brushed his toes down the side of Tony's leg, leaning in closer. "I do hope you have plans with me today," he half-whispered.

He bit back on a laugh as the words startled Tony awake. A piece of cereal rolled from his hair and hit the floor, but Tony didn't notice. Loki glanced at it, then leaned in. "Do you?" He asked.

Tony sucked down all of the water in the glass. He licked his lips, eyes darting towards the god. "What would you say to being tied to the bed?"

"I'd say that if you wished to keep your limbs, you would consider something else," Loki replied instantly.

“That’s a no then,” Tony said. His eyes wandered towards the ceiling. The headache had not relented. His forgotten responsibilities dawned on him. He groaned.

“What?” Loki asked.

“If I don’t accomplish something today, there’s going to be hell to pay.” There were forms due, reports, and...

Loki’s pointer finger traced the back of his neck, sending a shiver down his spine. He traced back and forth in little lines. Tony didn’t sense the urgency. “Hmm,” Loki disapproved.

“Yeah,” Tony said. He knocked his finger against the empty glass, producing a dull ring. He didn’t want to think about a damn thing that was going on in his life outside of this room. “Fuck it,” he said. “Your turn to suggest something.”

Loki stood, brushing his hair back from his face. “So you’ll stay,” Loki said, half-seeking confirmation. Tony nodded.

“I can get my tablet later and work in here,” Tony said. He enjoyed watching Loki’s face as the god mulled something over, his finger absently stretching open his collar.

Loki didn’t care what they did, so long as it kept him from his amorphous, lurking sense of dread and let him forget that he was more or less imprisoned. While he was thinking, Tony moved to stand.

A flood of cereal spilled from his head, bouncing across his shoulders and back before rolling to the floor. Tony held out his arms comically for a moment in confusion before his face sank in realization. Loki smiled innocently. Tony stared deadpan.

A laugh burst from Loki as Tony stepped forward, wrapping his arms around Loki’s back. “Is this your idea of funny?” Tony asked. He was trying to make the playful accusation sound threatening, but with his shorter stature Loki only found it hilarious.

“Do you?” Tony asked again. He pressed his lips to the hollow of Loki’s throat. Loki’s laughter sounded good in his ears. Warmth went all the way to the base of his spine. He felt fingers in his hair, freeing a lodged piece of cereal. Loki dropped it to the floor, laughing a bit hysterically. It ended with a deep, throaty chuckle. “You’re asking for trouble.”

“We both are,” Loki murmured, leaning in. His tongue slid tantalizingly along Tony’s parting lips before pulling away. There was something dark and ravenous in his eyes that made Tony dizzy. When their mouths met again it was Tony that was desperate, tugging Loki in closer.

They hit the bed hard. Loki succeeded in pining Tony down. He trailed his lips agonizingly slow along Tony’s neck, his chest shaking in a low laugh as Tony tried to spur him on faster, arching up against him with a needy gasp.

His head spun with the headache and blooming lust. He scrambled to find Loki’s hipbones, digging the pads of his thumbs over jutting bone as the god nipped at the soft junction of neck and shoulder. His hot tongue soothed the spot, almost remorsefully.

He rocked his hips forward with a deep throated echo of a laugh as Tony’s fingers feverishly tried to free them of their clothes. Loki deliberately made it difficult, pleased with Tony’s needy insistence.

“Just move,” Tony stated impatiently, his words ragged. Loki let his full weight fall against Tony,

torturing the man's growing erection. Loki grinned haughtily down over him, his dark hair framing his flushed face.

Tony's mouth slipped up into a smile, anticipating a reward or challenge. Loki just denied him, instead choosing to run his teeth along the curve of Tony's ear. His skin prickled and gave way to heat as Loki meandered down his neck, exploring.

The moment Tony relaxed into the bed and stopped clawing at clothes, Loki leaned up. Tony stared at him with lust hazed eyes, hanging on words that did not come. Loki peeled his shirt off slowly, flaunting the languid reveal of alabaster skin. He slipped his hands beneath Tony's shirt and tugged it back, freeing Tony from it just to lean down and press his lips to the man's sternum.

Tony shuddered, rocking to wrap his leg over Loki. A faint smile pulled up the corners of his lips as Loki freed him from everything but the moment. He sought that curly tangle of black hair between his fingers as Loki's head sank lower, meandering across his chest.

Loki's heart skipped in broken beats. He glanced up to see the blissful smile on Tony's face and felt heat surge through him. He closed his eyes, pressing his lips to flushed skin and promising himself that he wouldn't forget that look for anything.

Tony writhed as Loki unceremoniously freed him of the rest of his clothes, tossing them to the floor. Loki could hear blood pounding in his ears as he breathed heavily, his wet lips slightly swollen.

He took off what remained of his clothes with uncertainty, wondering as he stared down at the man if Tony wanted to get lost just as badly as he did. Tony distracted him from the thought, wrapping his hands around the small of his back. He murmured something soft, beckoning Loki closer. Loki obliged, groaning at the hot press of flesh on flesh and hiding his aroused face by sucking on the hard peak of flesh on Tony's chest.

Loki's heart was beating so hard that it demanded more of his attention than the heat pooling in his stomach and Tony's inviting hands kneading at his exposed flesh. He sank lower, head spinning with Tony's scent.

He hesitated for a moment, his warm breath drifting over Tony's hip. Tony was still, his hands clenched hard against the mattress, head tilted back too far for Loki to read with certainty. He felt Loki's warm breath pass over the aching length of his cock. "Oh," Tony gasped. Loki dragged his wet tongue along the swelled curve, taking his time before swirling his tongue under the head.

Tony made a strangled sound, bucking towards him and clawing at the bedsheets. With his mouth around the head of Tony's cock, Loki forgot his hands, letting them go limp as he lapped in the taste of pre come. Tony's heat radiated against his flushed face. He slid his mouth down further with a soft hum.

Tony encouraged him, his stomach tight as he gasped for breath. His toes curled in tight. He struggled not to thrust into Loki's mouth. The god's tongue played at little folds of skin, not exactly graceful but utterly destructive in the spearing need he stirred in Tony. The man groaned, muttering a broken string of praises, guiding one of Loki's hands back to him.

Loki's fingers followed Tony's demands, the man's eager hand warm against his own.

Loki moaned against the hard flesh in his mouth, Tony's body arching towards him. Tony's broken voice echoed in his ears as Tony's bitter taste filled his mouth, dripping down the back of his throat. He swallowed, hesitantly pressing his lips to Tony's thigh.

Tony was limp, breathing in short, ragged little breaths. There was sheer affection in his eyes as he beckoned Loki towards him. He tasted himself in the god's mouth, slicking his tongue over sharp teeth as Loki moaned into him. Another time Tony would drag things out, but for now he was too pleasantly thrilled with the god to deny him anything. Loki shuddered as Tony's hand found hard, bare skin and expertly had him coming undone. Loki came with a shout, mouth open wide, come spilling across Tony's chest and stomach.

He felt his face burn as he broke into a grin, eyes wandering just around the knowing, adoring grin on Tony's face. He leaned his head into the hand that wrapped against the side of his face, Tony murmuring devotions. Tony's thumb brushed away the slick on the corner of his lips.

As Loki's breathing came down he eased over onto the bed beside Tony. He didn't protest as Tony's lips met his shoulder and wandered towards his throat. He welcomed Tony's body over him and trailed his fingers along the hollow spaces in Tony's ribs as Tony whispered into his ear.

He could've spent an eternity like that, contented. It was only when Tony pulled away a while later muttering something about a headache and ibuprofen that the spell broke.

Tony left, promising to return later. Loki took a long shower, running the water as hot as it could go. Without a distraction, the melancholy from before was eager to take him back. He changed the sheets and crawled into bed, flipping through television channels. Tony sat beside him with a tablet when he returned. Loki wrapped his leg over Tony's. Tony glanced up to see that Loki was watching Long Island Medium. He tuned out and didn't stop working until he heard Gordon Ramsay yelling.

He glanced over to see Loki watching the television attentively. Tony brushed Loki's hair behind his ear. "Stark," Loki warned emptily, not breaking his attention from the television. Tony grinned fondly, then went back to composing an e-mail. He felt Loki's toes tighten minutely against his shin, holding on.



## Chapter 33

Smoke billowed from a building in the distance, but Tony knew that Steve and the Hulk were already on it. Personally, Tony didn't think that one wayward mutant was an Avengers worthy assignment, but he didn't care to argue the point with Steve. He dropped to the block below, lifting off his face plate.

Clint was a pace ahead. He'd already dropped his bow against his side and was checking his cellphone. "How was Portland?" Tony asked, walking up alongside him.

"Alright," Clint said stiffly with a half-hearted smile. His distant gaze and refusal to make eye contact stirred the anxiety that Tony was already bracing against.

"You didn't crash with Coulson and his sort-of-girlfriend, did you?" Tony teased him. Clint shook his head minutely. "How is he?" Tony asked.

"Fine," Clint said. "Considering."

"Did something happ—" He shut up at the look Clint shot him. Glowering, Clint shoved his phone down into his pocket. He didn't make a step to leave, so Tony assumed that meant that he was supposed to say something. "Look," Tony said. He licked his lips, his vision falling briefly to the pavement before meeting Clint's stare. "I didn't mean for things to happen with Loki and I understand if you're upset—"

"We don't need to talk about it," Clint said. He turned his head, directing his attention towards an evacuated cafe. "Just don't ask me to come to any events where he'll be there. That's it." With that he started to walk.

"So we're good," Tony said cautiously, hurrying to catch up.

Clint didn't pull away when Tony came up beside him. "I brought stuff back from my mission," Clint said casually.

"Like work stuff or—"

"Like food stuff," Clint said. He turned in the opposite direction of the smoke, selecting a street that hadn't been cleared. He pulled open the glass door of a convenience store.

"I'm going to make sure everything's squared away," Tony said, stepping back. His face plate slammed closed. "I'll meet you back there." Clint went inside while he rocketed away.

He watched Tony's trail in the sky fade as the cashier rang up drinks and food.

They were sprawled out along the living room couches in their usual post-mission recuperation, poking fun at an old movie. Tony was making the best quips (in his opinion, of course) and though his eager voice bounced along the room he could not stop mentally estimating how long it would be before the movie ended.

The big bad had just fallen, so it had to be soon, right?

No, the two title characters had to hook up before then.

So then it had to be— “Tony?”

He glanced over to see Steve waiting patiently. No one else seemed to be staring, so Tony assumed that he hadn't been trapped in his own head for too long. “Could you pass that?” Tony handed him the popcorn bowl from the side table.

The couple onscreen was coming into a large sum of money. Life was great so the credits should be rolling...come on, come on...*finally*. A shrill violin announced the end as a stream of names flooded the black screen. At last Tony could get up and— “Let's watch the next one,” Bruce suggested.

Tony prayed that no one heard the faint whine in his throat. He stood up quickly. “Bathroom,” he said, dismissing himself. No one stirred from their comfortable positions on the couch.

When Tony had left the room, Steve glanced casually to his side and caught Bruce's eye. They grinned, sharing a mutual look. They both knew where Tony was really going.

Loki was hunched down over a chess board, lost in thought. “Stare as long as you'd like,” Jarvis said. “I just worry for its effect on your ego.” A cruel smirk pulled at Loki's mouth but vanished just as quickly.

“You're getting along now?” Tony asked, coming into the room. He stood over Loki's shoulder, examining the board.

“We have an understanding,” Loki replied. He moved a pawn.

“You may move my knight to take your pawn,” Jarvis announced. Loki glared spitefully, knocking the pawn with unnecessary force to the floor.

“He's programmed with every possibility,” Tony said. “Even the best players in the world would probably lose to him.”

“Thank you for the encouragement,” Loki replied. He leaned in closer to the chess board, away from Tony's breath against his shoulder. “And need I remind you,” he said. “That I am not of this world?”

Tony scoffed, backing off. “Alright,” he said. Tony was going to tell Jarvis to go easy on Loki, but now he changed his mind. “We're having a movie night and I kind of need to put in an appearance or they'll start whining about how they miss me,” Tony said. “They're so needy.” Loki hummed, hearing half of his words. “Do you need anything?”

“No,” Loki said. He felt Tony's hand rest against his shoulder a moment before the man said goodbye. “Enjoy a night with your comrades,” Loki said. “I shall see you tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Tony said. “I can come back down, it doesn't have to be like that. It's not like an all night thing—”

Loki tore his concentration away from the chess board. His spine cracked as he sat up straight, turning his head towards Tony. “I am well. Time spent with your comrades is not wasted.” He tapped at a chess piece, considering boundaries. It was not that Stark's company was unwelcome. It was a life raft in many ways, but Loki wondered if it was the best thing for either of them. Sometimes he wondered if it made him weak.

Tony, however, would have none of it. He wrapped his arms around Loki's stiff shoulders and rested his head down. "I know you need things to be on your terms," Tony said. "But I *want* to be here with you." He closed his eyes, unable to beg. He didn't want to tell Loki that at that moment a night alone in his bed seemed like the worst thing that could happen to him. "Not with them," Tony said, pretending that he was really just assuring Loki of his preferences.

Loki's shoulders dropped slightly. Then his whole chest relaxed in one long breath. "You're blocking the board," Loki said.

"Uh-huh," Tony said, not moving.

Loki puffed out an annoyed sigh. "You have all night to block the board, can you not spare me this moment?" Tony stepped back, an ease passing through him at Loki's roundabout invitation.

Tony leaned forward and kissed his cheek in goodbye. He chuckled at the way Loki's head swayed with the motion, his eyes darting to the side as his lips pulled into a tight line that was fighting off a smile. Though Loki pretended to be unaffected, Tony easily read the poorly masked affection. A faint blush had crept along Loki's neck.

"Good luck," Tony said, gesturing towards the chess board. Loki grinned, tapping his finger against a pawn.

"I shan't need it," he said.

Tony laughed as Jarvis chimed in to assure Loki that he would. When Tony settled onto the couch with everyone upstairs, he stopped obsessively checking the clock.

Loki was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head resting against his laced fingers with his elbows on his knees, his eyes lost in thought. It was a moment before he sat up, hearing the door open. He turned softly, expecting Tony.

He went rigid. It was not Tony's slender frame in the doorway, but a much smaller one, panting with a lowered head. She clutched a rectangular bundle of cloth against her chest.

Jane looked back over her shoulder protectively before closing the door. She strode into the room, taking a cursory glance at the messy surroundings. Loki studied her closely as she approached him. She seemed sharper, less apologetic. "Here," she said, holding out the bundle to him.

It was heavy. He set it in his lap, carefully unfolding the animal skin covering. "Where did you get this?" He asked, his eyes locking on hers.

Jane crossed her arms against her chest. She was wearing a blue Asgardian ensemble, with markings only permitted on clothing belonging to a member of the court. It did not escape his notice that there was a singed gash along the bottom of her dress. "It's amazing what people will give you access to when they think you can find their king."

He bit the inside of his cheek. It was the healing text that he needed, but he was uncertain of Jane's motivations. "Getting into the library's easy," she said. "The vault—" She shrugged. "Still easy."

"Would I be right in assuming that no one knows you're here?" Loki asked. Jane nodded her head.

"I learn fast," she said. She watched his eyes dart along her, assuming that he was looking for the tesseract. "Anyway," she said.

He steadied, expecting her to list terms or threaten him. Instead she waited expectantly for him to open the book.

There was no way that he was allowing the book to go. That wasn't even in question. "Heimdall will see this," Loki said. Jane shook her head, smirking slightly.

"Give me some credit," she said. Jane glanced at the bed and then strode over to one of the barstools instead. She seemed more confident, but anxiously aggressive. "I'll be back before anyone notices." She was studying Loki just as closely as he was watching her. "I'm not giving you that because I think you deserve a thousand second chances," she said.

His fingertips brushed along the edge of the book, aching to crack it open. Jane presented a more immediate problem. "I'm doing it because Tony asked me to." Loki's heart thudded in his chest. He felt lightheaded. "And," Jane said, her voice supernaturally loud in his ears, "you should clean up your own mess. Whatever that is."

She began pacing the room. It occurred to Loki that she felt comfortable allowing him out of her sight when she had been weary of him before. Something had already changed her on Asgard, he just wasn't certain what it was. Jane picked up one of his books. She flipped open the cover and spun through the pages without reading them. "They think he's alive, you know." She set the book down on the stand and pulled out another. "Am I giving them false hope?"

"I cannot tell you that," Loki said. His eyes followed her path through the room, assessing her movements. "You've been busy."

A small smirk appeared on Jane's mouth. "I think I misjudged you." She turned her body towards him, holding a new book in her hands. "You were being honest."

Loki raised an eyebrow.

"What was it that you said to me?" She asked. Jane set the book down and began a series of careful steps around the counter. "We're just mayflies to you? You could waste a hundred lifetimes in this room and still walk out over our corpses?" She pretended to consider the statement. Loki gripped the book a bit tighter. "And there was the whole bit about Thor having others waiting to take my place." Her lips twisted unhappily to the side. "You told me I was wasting my time. I only have a few years and—" She walked over to the window. "In those few years I'm going to advance Earth further than we ever thought possible. I'm going to do things we've never dreamed of," she said.

Jane scanned the skyline, imaging how it would change when she brought Asgard's information back. "I had the power of the Aether in me, and I never used it."

Loki dug a nail into the embossed title.

"I'm not going to let this opportunity slip from my hands," Jane said. "I'm not going to give this power up." He could not see her expression as her back was to him. "Maybe I am, as you said, just a toy to Thor. But because Thor trusts me, I have access to just about everything I want on Asgard. I am going to learn."

"You might not like everything you find," Loki said ominously.

"No," Jane said. "And I haven't."

Jane's arms braced across her chest. Her gaze narrowed as she stared him down. "I know that you only see me as a pawn, just as Asgard does. See me as Thor's mortal fling, or a nuisance, or even the girl in the class, but my research will live on. My research is going to make things better."

Jane's attention fell onto the book. "In a way I have you to thank for that. If you hadn't caused chaos on Asgard, they never would have become desperate enough to consider granting me access to anything."

"Would it not serve you better to allow me to rot?" Loki asked. "Why are you giving me this?" There was a heavy edge to his words that had no affect on Jane. She looked at him plainly.

"I've looked through that book," she said. "I'm fairly certain that I know, and I can't help you with everything. Eventually they'll come back to get you." Jane came closer to him, her tone softening. "I really am doing this because Tony asked me to, and Tony has been a good friend to me. You figure it out, Loki."

"I may have misjudged you as well," Loki said. It was not admitted fondly.

"You did tell me to make something of the time I have left," Jane said with a half-smile. She took a deep breath. They were both about to speak when the door came open.

"Jane?" Tony blurted in surprise. Loki glanced over at her in time to see a genuine smile lighting up her face. It spurred a quiet wave of jealousy. Tony was hugging her before she could protest. "Are you alright? What happened?"

"I can't stay long," Jane said. "I'm fine. I brought that book for Loki," she said. Tony's eyes fell to the book in Loki's lap, his mouth falling slightly open. "And this for you." She pulled a USB from a hidden pocket, as well as several cards that Loki recognized as an Asgardian version of information storage. "Don't lose these," Jane said. "Make copies and keep them secure."

"What's on this?" He asked, holding up a translucent blue tinted card.

"Something your realm should not have access to," Loki said.

"You really don't seem the type to enforce the prime directive," Jane said. Loki missed the reference but Tony didn't. His expression changed. The card felt warm in his hand. "Besides, upgrading Midgard will work to your advantage." She ignored the scowl on Loki's face. "Think about it," she said.

"What about Thor?" Tony asked. Jane shook her head minutely.

"I've spent maybe twenty minutes with him since I got onto Asgard," Jane said. There was a raw bitterness in her voice. "The rest of it has been me combing through everything they have to find out where Odin is. They think I can figure out how to open whatever portal he's trapped in." She glanced over at Loki. "You're lucky they still think you're incapacitated," she said. Loki sneered dismissively.

"When's he coming back?" Tony asked.

Sympathy brushed across Jane's face. "Probably not for a while, Tony." She frowned and brushed her hair back behind her ear. "I'm sorry. He's overwhelmed with duties in Odin's absence. I don't know if he will." Tony turned to Loki, searching the god's face for how the news should have made him feel. Loki didn't look at either of them. He just stared straight ahead unpleasantly.

"Tell Darcy I'm sorry," Jane said. "I'm not coming back until they force me to come back."

"Why?" Tony asked. A soft chime sounded from Jane. She reached into a pocket and silenced something.

“I need to go,” Jane said. “Tony, don’t let those files fall into anyone’s hands. And take care, alright?” She took a step backwards towards the door. “I really have to go.”

“Bye,” Tony said, sounding hollow.

Jane smiled apologetically before disappearing behind the door. There was a faint light along the doorframe. Tony didn’t have to look to know that she was gone. “She won’t return as the same person,” Loki said behind Tony.

He turned for an explanation, but Loki was already thumbing through the text in his hands. Tony sat down numbly on a barstool, staring at the cards in his hands. Part of him worried for what Jane was getting herself into, and part of him was immensely curious about what the files contained. “What’s on these?” Tony asked Loki.

Loki didn’t seem to hear him. He was frantically reading a page, muttering to himself. “Loki?” Tony asked a little louder. Still nothing. “*Loki*,” Tony said.

Hearing his name, the god held up his hand. He did not stop reading.

Tony turned the cards over, examining them closely. “Jarvis,” Tony said. “Let’s take a look at these.”

Tony sat down at the counter. He was unwilling to leave Loki. He knew what book it was. He needed a port for the USB though, and the lab would be better suited for decoding the cards. Loki could probably even tell Tony how to do it.

He set the cards down and allowed Jarvis to analyze what little he could. Otherwise Tony sat there, studying Loki. The god’s lips moved in swift, soundless motions. His finger ran back and forth on a page and paused occasionally. Long tendrils of hair draped over his shoulder against his gray blue shirt. Tony memorized every detail, painfully aware that things would soon change.

A crinkle of lines spidered out from Loki’s eyes as he reread the same line three times. A heavy sigh escaped his chest, then a long winding note of despair and frustration. Tony stood quickly at the sound and rushed to the bedside.

Loki was shaking his head in disbelief. His eyes had widened unnaturally, the whites screaming at Tony as Loki stared at the wall. His chest shook as he breathed faster and faster. “What’s wrong?” Tony asked gently.

Loki could not will himself to stop shaking his head. He felt something warm roll down his cheek but was disconnected from feeling it. He was aware of the book slipping from his hands to be placed on the bed beside him. He was aware of its weight sinking into the bed, and the animal skin cloth being pulled from his legs and set on top of the book. A slow blink impaired his sight as he felt warmth meet his skin and Tony’s hands cradle his face.

Tony brushed his thumb across Loki’s cheek. That dislodged several more tears for him to brush away, watching as Loki’s lip trembled. He sensed that Loki needed a moment and filled it by quietly saying, “I’m here.”

Loki closed his eyes. Tony’s voice came through the empty despair clouding his thoughts long enough for Loki to consider pushing him away or allowing him to stay. A moment later he forgot.

Tony’s hands slipped behind his ears and gently massaged, tangling in his hair and sliding to the base of his skull. “It’s...” Loki said, licking his lips and tasting salt. “It’s trapped in wretched Gungnir.”

“What’s trapped?” Tony asked quietly. His hands trailed to the bottom of Loki’s neck and gently rubbed.

“My magic,” Loki said. “They came too quickly,” he said, shaking his head compulsively. “If they hadn’t interfered, the only part of me that would have attached to Gungnir was the memory of Odin.” His voice warped between peaks between fury and sorrow. “Instead, the parts of me that my magic recognizes has drawn it in to collect with the wretched thing.” He batted Tony’s hands away, breathing heavily. “It’s been drawn there this entire time,” Loki hissed. “And what is left of it is untrained and hardly wieldable.”

Tony’s lips raised in a grim, sympathetic smile. He was trying to be reassuring, but his soulful brown eyes would always give him away. There was a deep worry there, and even a little fear. Tony wasn’t sure whether he could touch Loki without being shoved away so he stayed as close to Loki without touching as the god allowed. “Why did you trap the memory in Gungnir, and what is it?”

“Odin’s spear,” Loki said. “Because it was in my hands,” Loki said. His voice began to climb. “Because I knew what they would do to me to find Odin’s whereabouts, and because that was the one thing I held over them. Because concealing that information from myself meant taking it from them, and because I could demand a weapon to answer them and they would have no choice but to give it!” Loki rose from the bed, shaking as he did, but pushing past Tony with the back of his hand.

“Because I was trapped,” Loki said. A broken laugh jumped from his throat. “I need not have bothered.”

Loki’s eyes fell on the cards left by Jane. “And now I get to sit and watch as this mortal realm bleeds mine of all its knowledge.” Loki’s lip curled upwards. “Though Asgard stole a great deal of it. A fitting fate for the thieves,” his voice trailed off. Loki twisted his hands behind his back and began circling the room.

He felt his lip tremble again and another tear shove its way to the surface. “We’ll get the spear back,” Tony promised. Loki spun around on his heel.

“And how do you suppose you’ll do that?” He shouted, a tear falling even as his voice ricocheted off the narrow walls. “Beg my oafish brother? Steal from Asgard?” Loki kicked a book lying on the floor against the wall. “I did not intend for my power to be locked away from me!”

“I know,” Tony said, straining to keep his voice level. Adrenaline coursed through him. He could feel sweat roll down his side. “But Jane got that book, right? We can figure something out, Loki.”

“Can you?” Loki yelled. He knocked the chessboard over. The rattling pieces offered nothing to satisfy his rage. “*Can you?*”

Tony didn’t know what to do. He had never been very good at disengaging arguments. Especially when they were with Pepper. The reminder sent a fresh wave of anxiety and dread through Tony. What was he supposed to do? He never won with Pepper, he never made things right. And now it was happening with Loki...

Tony didn’t catch onto the reality that he was breathing too quickly, or that the room was suddenly going blurry. He did hear the door swing open, and Steve’s voice fill the room. “What is going on?!”

Tony wobbled, attempting to steady himself. He felt hands at his back and realized that it was

Natasha. “We’re—” Tony stuttered out, smiling stupidly. “We’re good.”

“You set off an alarm,” Natasha muttered. “And we could hear yelling on the other side of the door.” Her hand snaked around Tony’s wrist, checking his pulse.

“Get out,” Loki snapped. Tony took a step towards him. “Get out!”

“I know things seem bad but they’ll turn around,” Tony said. He didn’t want to leave Loki alone in pain. Steve anxiously moved closer to Tony, standing between them. Loki glanced wearily at Tony’s teammates before answering him.

“I said leave.”

“Guys,” Tony said, trying to make them leave.

“All of you,” Loki warned.

Tony tried to push past Steve, but the Captain did not allow it. Trapped behind Steve, Tony could not tear his focus from Loki. He heard Natasha walk behind him and move something on the counter. “Steve,” Tony said. “I’m fine.” His eyes flickered closed as he said it. He willed them back open, aware that he was on the edge of a panic attack. He was becoming too dizzy to stand. “Please go.”

Loki was recognizing it. He clenched his hands in tight fists, swaying. He wanted to help Tony, but he also wanted the three mortals to stop staring at him like a rabid dog. “We need to go,” Natasha said, making the decision for all of them. “Tony,” she demanded.

He shook as she guided him out the door. He knew that Steve was staying behind and saying something, he could hear Loki’s voice responding, but the pain in his chest absorbed all of his attention. “Breathe,” Natasha said. Tony slid down onto the floor of the elevator. He closed his eyes and began focusing on slowing his breaths in a way that was all too familiar.

Steve had returned to the elevator for some time before Tony stood back up. “I’m going to the lab,” he said. He needed to be doing something. He remembered the cards. “Fuck,” he said. “I left—” Natasha held up a USB drive. She set it in his palm, along with the cards.

“It’s taking all the self-restraint I have not to nose through those,” Natasha said.

“Remind me to get you a gold star,” Tony said.

He leaned his head back against the elevator wall, mortified. They were both familiar with his panic attacks, but it didn’t make Tony feel any better. “Jane came back,” he said.

“How?” Natasha asked.

It felt better to have something to talk about. Tony explained what had happened as the elevator headed towards the lab. They followed him inside. Steve took a seat on Tony’s desk, watching as the inventor sank into his computer chair. They were silent when Tony had finished relaying the news.

Natasha glanced at Steve, but he did not react. “Can we stay with you?” Steve asked.

Tony eyed him for a moment before realizing that he was too exhausted to argue. He thought of his empty bed and decided that their company would be much better. “Yeah,” Tony said. “If you don’t mind boredom.”



“I’ll go get some tea,” Natasha said. “Want anything else?” They both shook their heads.

Steve and Tony were quietly talking when she got back. Steve had dragged a chair up beside Tony’s desk. “They’re not the same situation,” Steve was telling Tony. “He’s not her.”

“I know that logically,” Tony said. A long trail of steam drifted past him as Natasha set a mug down beside him. “But that doesn’t keep me from reacting like it is.”

Steve thanked Natasha and patted Tony’s arm. The computer chair squeaked as Tony turned towards his desk and connected the USB.

By the early morning hours Steve was asleep. His head was against the desk and he had slumped over in his chair. Soft snoring sounds came from him. It brought a tiny smile to Tony’s lips.

Natasha was sleeping in a bean bag chair by the door, but Tony had a hard time believing that she ever really slept at all. He suspected that if he got up and walked that way she would be up in a heartbeat. He was not going to test the theory.

He looked past the files and programs on his screens to the tiny window that he’d kept open on the bottom. Loki was asleep in bed, finally. Tony had watched the soundless image as Loki had torn apart the room before he had picked up the Asgardian book and mournfully reread the same passage until he succumbed to exhaustion.

Tony stared at it for a long time, thinking about the morning.

## Chapter 34

Tony didn't know how he'd managed to doze off, but when he woke up he was alone and there was a jacket over his back. A glance at the clock said that it was seven thirty. He guessed that he had gotten two hours of sleep.

He stood stiffly, rubbing his eyes. The jacket fell to the chair. He felt dazed and tired and for a moment he thought that he had a hangover, but last night was too vivid in his mind to blame the cause on anything else.

Tony grabbed his phone and his wallet. He had errands to run.

Loki rolled over in bed. His eyelids snapped open. Immediately he thought of the day before. He wasn't even reprieved for a moment.

Some time during the night he'd rolled onto the book. Its sharp edge in his side had created an ache that followed him as he got up and slumped towards the bathroom.

He turned on the shower and sunk to the floor, kicking his feet up against the side. Steam clouded the bathroom like a raincloud, fogging the glass and making the air dense to breathe in.

Loki bit down on his thumbnail. He saw his mother's face, haloed in golden curls as she told him that Asgard was his. The weight of gunnir sinking down into his palms had sated a hunger deep within him. He recalled the pride and ambition that had surged through him as clearly as though it were yesterday. Loki remembered looking to her, hoping to see her pride in him.

Frigga's voice echoed through his mind in that memory, telling him to make his father proud. Loki scoffed, rattling the glass pane of the shower as he kicked his foot against the wall.

He wondered what would happen to him when the Avengers discovered the wrecked room. Would they confiscate everything? Would he be punished or reprimanded or moved to a new location? They seemed awfully weak and lenient.

He dropped his head back against the wall. He held up his prune like fingers, listlessly staring at them. They could summon no spell. What was left for him now? Who was he if he didn't have magic?

He asked that question again and again as the water pounded against him.

The only thing that pulled him out of the shower was hunger. He wrapped a towel around his waist and padded out into the room. He pulled leftovers from the fridge and sat at the counter. Water dripped down his slender back from his drenched hair and pooled on the floor below him.

He turned on the television. The corner of the screen read ten thirty. He hardly saw the news as he watched, following the screen with his eyes but losing his mind elsewhere.

Something clattered as it fell over, but he didn't pay attention until Tony's voice followed the sound. "Shit," Tony hissed, kicking a container out of the way. "It looks like The Who's hotel room in here." Loki ignored him.

Tony waded through clothes and books and debris. He grabbed the remote and turned off the TV.

“Are you going to move today reindeer games?” The only response he got was a blink. Tony nudged Loki’s shoulder. “Come on.”

“Why,” Loki said. There was a hint of defiance in his voice. Or maybe it was just more cynicism hiding out under that despondency, Tony wasn’t really sure.

“As much as I like the look,” Tony said, “now’s not the time for it. You’ve got to get dressed, Santa’s workshop only ships once a year and you’re flying out.”

Loki didn’t understand Tony’s babble. He felt the man’s hand at his shoulder again, sliding across wet skin. He tensed away from the touch. Tony turned away and tripped over something as he hurried towards the bathroom. He returned carrying a fluffy white towel. “Be stubborn,” Tony said, throwing the towel over Loki’s head. “See if I care.”

He ruffled the towel as fast as he could, rocking Loki’s head in the motion as he dried the slick mop of hair. He ruffled the towel until he heard Loki’s voice in a surprised laugh that was so brief Tony doubted that he’d heard it. “Stark,” Loki warned. It didn’t sound angry enough, so Tony kept ruffling the towel. “Stark!”

The towel ceased its torment but did not move. Seeing only white, Loki muttered against the damp fabric, “enough.”

Tony smiled innocently at him as he pulled the towel away. “Get dressed.”

Loki stared at him. Though Loki was slumped forward and a long cry from okay, Tony thought that he could make out the faintest glimmer of amusement. “Get dressed or I *will* dress you,” Tony said. “And that’s not nearly as fun as me undressing you.”

Loki stared at Tony’s unyielding face, debating how much Tony meant it. Perhaps he could sit there infinitely. Tony raised his eyebrows impatiently. “Today, Black Sabbath.” Tony nudged him again.

Loki got up and carefully began picking his way through the room for places to step. The towel slipped from his waist to the floor. Tony whistled. Another time Loki would’ve painted a very colorful picture of how he’d bring about Tony’s demise for that action. He just didn’t have the energy today.

He dug clothes out of the closet and put them on slowly, balancing himself by holding one arm against the wall. When he turned back around Tony was gone. He came out of the bathroom just as Loki slumped onto his barstool.

Tony had taken his hairbrush. He stood behind Loki and gathered the god’s hair into his hand. Without a word, Tony began brushing through the ends. Loki didn’t fight him as he worked his way upwards. Tony worked diligently through tangles. Occasionally Tony’s fingers brushed against Loki’s neck as he worked. The brush’s soft teeth ran soothingly against Loki’s scalp.

The brush stilled in Tony’s hands. “You’re kinda scaring me, Rudolph.” Loki stared at the wall. He heard nothing, not even Tony’s breathing. The brush began again. It started at his temples and worked through to the ends.

Tony set the brush down. Loki felt his hair pulled to the side, and realized after a moment that Tony was braiding it. He left the bottom undone. If Loki had been paying closer attention, he would have recognized it as a style Tony saw Thor wear.

When Tony finished, he cupped his hands against Loki’s shoulders and took a deep breath. He

would feel better if Loki would threaten him or pull away or at least say something. Anything. Was he embarrassed by something or just deeply unhappy? Tony wasn't sure.

"That'll be free of charge," Tony said. "Which is a hell of a deal. You should see what hairdressers cost for red carpet events." He pushed a book out of the way with his foot so that he could walk around to see Loki's face. The god avoided eye contact. He stared at the crumbs on the counter instead. "Get up," Tony said.

"Get up or I *will* make you get up," Tony said. He hoped that it would work as well as the first time. "Now," he said, reminding himself of Rhodey.

Loki did get up, but he started walking towards the bed. Tony caught his arm. "Uh-uh," Tony said. "This way."

Loki turned his head to see that Tony was pointing towards the door. It was the first real emotion that Tony had seen all morning.

Loki's lips flinched.

Tony tugged at his arm. Loki swayed in the motion but did not budge from where he was rooted to the floor. "You need fresh air," Tony said. "Come on."

"But—"

"—No buts," Tony said. "Move." He threw his whole weight into tugging Loki, which admittedly wasn't much. Still, he tried. "Loki," he said. "You're in a tower full of super powered freaks that have brought down two alien invasions. Both of which started with Asgard. So unless we say so, no one's taking you. Got it?"

Loki didn't have the energy to argue with Tony. He stared down at the man. He could feel his eyes widen, his lips minutely part. "Just follow me, alright?" Tony tugged again.

This time Loki allowed it. He followed the man, stepping over an array of thrown things. When Tony pulled him past the door it felt surreal. He had been through before, but this time felt like it was happening to someone else. He was only watching in.

Tony didn't let go of him when they reached the elevator. They didn't speak. When it had nearly reached the penthouse the elevator stopped.

The first thing Loki saw was daylight.

All of New York was spread out before them. The far wall was nothing but a long series of windows. Tony let him slip away. He walked until he was mere inches from the glass.

It was the first time that Loki had really looked at the city. It was a gray and rusty blue grid surrounded by water. A few pigeons flew past. He smelled fresh air and turned to see that a window was cracked open on the left wall. His eyes wandered towards the blue sky. It was marred by smog but beautiful all the same.

It wasn't exactly freedom, but it still undid a knot in Loki's chest.

It was a long time before Loki left the window. When he finally turned to take in the rest of the room, he saw that Tony had food set out on the counter and was busy fixing a microwave.

Bruce had said that it needed repairs weeks ago. Tony had put it off, like most things. He was

putting off three Stark Industries meetings today and catching hell for it, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Loki felt lightheaded as he inspected the room. There was a big couch with blankets draped across the back. A flatscreen television hung on the wall, and in the corner was a small bookshelf and a basket of children's toys. There was a door that Loki assumed led to a bathroom, and then there was the kitchenette that Tony was at.

Loki wandered to the middle of the room. After glancing back at Tony, he sat down on the couch. He had lost himself staring outside again when Tony's voice casually carried across the room. "This is kind of a whatever floor. Sometimes family comes to visit or we let visitors hang out here." He swung the microwave door shut. "There's coffee over here if you want it."

Loki looked back out the window. After a minute he stood and walked to the counter. There was no where to sit. He busied himself by grabbing one of the coffees. Loki noticed that Tony had brought all of the things that he had expressed a liking for, and then some things that he had never seen before.

Loki turned the cup in his hands and toyed with the cardboard sleeve. He enjoyed watching Tony work. There was a precision to the way that Tony did things. For a while he stood there awkwardly, watching.

When Tony seemed satisfied he stood up, smiling at Loki.

Loki took a sip and stared down at the lid of the cup.

"So," Tony said. "Whenever a company makes a game using Iron Man they send me a free system." Tony walked up to the TV and pointed to a black box. He held up a controller. "It's a promotional sort of thing. I don't spend a lot of time on them, but you might be good at them."

Loki was uncertain of what Tony was talking about, but he was hyperaware of how stiff he felt standing there. He walked over and took what Tony held out. He set the coffee down on a low table. As he sunk onto the couch, Tony turned on the screen.

"You move like this," Tony said, taking the controller from him and demonstrating. A few minutes later Tony was watching as Loki's avatar fell repeatedly from the same cliff. He pretended that was normal, encouraged it even. He felt better seeing Loki doing something, even if he wasn't talking. "If you want to do something else, we can do that too."

An hour later and Loki was breezing through the levels like child's play.

Tony worked on his tablet and made an effort to at least sort of get things done. He'd been allowing too much to slip. He stayed close in quiet company, pausing now and then to glance at Loki or watch the game.

Tony heard the controller hit the table and looked up to see that Loki had beaten the game. "Wanna try another one?" Tony asked tepidly. Loki inclined his head so Tony grabbed a stack of them and let Loki choose.

Tony was in the middle of evaluating a design document when he sensed that Loki was getting bored. He set his tablet down on the table and moved to be more open. Loki turned off the game.

Loki licked his dry lips. "You recovered," he said.

"From last night? Yeah," Tony said. "Nothing I couldn't handle." He moved around, pressing his

back against the arm of the couch so that he was facing Loki. “You?”

Loki kneaded his fingers together. There was no part of this where he would come off looking good and in control, and he knew it. There was no lie that Tony would believe. He cracked a wry smile.

Tony heard a little huff beneath the grin, and watched attuned as Loki’s gaze trailed across the coffee table. He was just about to tell Loki that he didn’t have to say anything when he heard, “your asking Jane is appreciated.” Loki rubbed his nose. “I did not anticipate her usefulness.”

“I didn’t do it because I thought she was useful,” Tony said. “I asked because we’re friends and I knew she’d help out if she could.” Tony scratched his beard. Usefulness didn’t have anything to do with it.

Loki set his feet up on the coffee table. His striped navy socks slid against the slick varnish. “I did not think that she would take risks on my behalf.”

“Well, she might still,” Tony said. He sounded hopeful. “Maybe she can talk Thor into loaning out goo goo for *research*.” Loki’s brow furrowed before he relaxed.

“Gungnir,” Loki corrected him.

“Yeah. That’s what I said,” Tony replied. He smirked. Loki rolled his eyes. “I started decoding the files she sent. It looks like she’s got the entire history of Asgard and then some on there.”

Loki’s eyes drifted towards the ceiling. He looked especially haggard, with bags beneath his sullen eyes and strands of dark hair frizzing free of the braid. “I suppose that is inevitable.” He crossed his arms against his chest. “Meddlesome,” he said.

“You’re one to talk,” Tony said lightly. Loki did not disagree. Instead, he stared out at the dimming skyline. “You’ve made it this far,” Tony said. “We’ll figure things out.”

Loki tugged in a long breath. “We will,” Tony promised.

“Even if,” Loki said. “Things will not be the same.”

Tony carded his fingers through his short hair. “Yeah,” he said. It was an empty sound. He heard Steve’s voice in his head. *I think you could help him. I think you’re the only person to do it. I think you’re the right person to do it.* Tony’s foot flinched. He was asking himself what Steve would do, and for once not poking fun at it. “I...” Tony said. “It’s hard and it’s a set back and it hurts,” Tony said. “I get that.” He couldn’t look at Loki. He felt a burn in his cheeks as he pulled the words up like molasses. “But what seems like the end might just be the beginning. I...had to fall to become Iron Man. It was a reinvention and maybe...maybe this is your fall. Maybe this is your reinvention.”

Tony glanced towards the door as if Steve would be standing there to applaud him. The Steve in his mind rolled his eyes instead and vanished with an incredulous grin. *You’re trying to hard*, Tony thought.

Loki didn’t say anything. He got up and walked to the window. This time Tony joined him. “Right over there,” Tony said, pointing to a gray square. “Is where my mother took me iceskating when I was five. I fell on the ice and scraped up my hand.” Tony held out his fingers. “That’s this one,” he said, pointing to a slender scar. It was one of many. Loki was paying attention, so Tony kept talking.

“That,” Tony said, tapping on the glass over a series of buildings, “is where I used to hang out when I was avoiding my dad during the holidays when I wasn’t at boarding school. And that,” he said, pointing to a tall building, “is where I had originally planned to build Stark tower. There were some zoning issues with the city. This was a better choice.” Tony grinned. “They have a mean schwarma shop in there now anyway.”

“And that’s the bakery you like,” Tony said. Loki could only make out the faint pink trim of its signboard. “And that’s the one you don’t like.”

“Over there is the clinic that Bruce volunteers at, and that’s Natasha’s favorite bar. Don’t tell her that I told you. She likes their martinis.” Tony stepped in closer to Loki. “That’s where Steve and I go for breakfast. He’s got a thing for the waitress, he just won’t admit it.”

“Where would you take me?”

Tony glanced over to find that Loki was watching him. “Well,” Tony said, looking out over his city. He quieted and studied the skyline. “Actually,” Tony said. “I’d probably start here. My happiest memories are here.”

“And then anywhere you wanted,” Tony said. He cleared his throat. “So…” Long shadows trailed across the floors. “I’m starting to feel like I’m in a Hallmark special. How does dinner sound? Okay? Sort of okay?” He frowned. “Hello? Earth to Loki?”

“Yes, Stark.”

“Okay,” Tony said, breaking away. Loki watched him practically run to the kitchenette. There were no instant cures to the heartache in his chest, or the depressing thoughts clouding his mind, but Tony was there. The thought lessened some aching place in him.

Tony couldn’t fix everything, but he would damn well try. Loki sat back down on the couch. He listened to plates rattle behind him. “Here,” Tony said, appearing over his shoulder with a glass of wine. He set it into Loki’s open hand and disappeared again.

In his hand it twirled, reflecting the evening light in rollicking waves. The citrusy, floral smell floated upward but did nothing to invite him in. Loki just twirled it until Tony sat down beside him. Tony handed him a plate, forcing him to set the glass down.

It was a creamy pasta with an abundant helping of shrimp. Loki picked at it with his fork, and noticed that Tony was doing the same. “It’s just a shit day,” Tony said. “That’s all.” He stabbed at a shrimp. “Just a shit day,” he said quietly.

Loki tried to finish but just wound up setting it on the table beside Tony’s half finished plate. Night had fallen. The city lights shone under a full moon. Tony reached behind them and grabbed a blanket. He tucked it over Loki’s shoulders before wrapping it around himself.

Loki had the glass between his fingers. He took a long sip.

Tony scooted in closer. He kept trying to think of what Rhodey or Steve or Bruce would say to make things feel okay. They were good at this sort of thing, and Tony…not so much. He tilted the glass in his own hands. Loki was scaring him. “Can I do anything?” Tony asked.

“No,” Loki answered.

Tony had been chewing on his bottom lip. He tried to recall what he had wanted to hear on his days like this but could not put his finger on it. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Loki said. He set an empty glass on the coffee table.

“Okay,” Tony said. He stared out at the skyline, watching cars pass in streams of red and white light. He felt the glass lifted from his hands and turned to see Loki setting it on the coffee table.

“Are you—” He said uncertainly. Loki just grabbed his shirt collar and tugged.

Loki laid down on the couch and pulled Tony over him. When he had comfortably settled the man against his chest, he rested his head against a pillow on the arm of the couch. He could feel Tony’s heart beating nervously against him. He hushed the man, running his fingers through Tony’s short hair. Loki closed his eyes. He felt Tony’s chest vibrate in a half-spoken word.

Loki freed one of his legs and bent it at the knee, further tangling them in the blanket. Tony’s pulse returned to normal. Despite the extra heat, Loki was freezing. He unbent his knee and wrapped his leg over Tony’s, circling his arms around the man’s back. He was relieved that Tony wasn’t speaking. There was nothing that he needed Tony to say. Having him there was enough.

Loki cracked an eye open. Tony was asleep. Loki sighed and reached over the back of the couch for another blanket. He draped it over them and closed his eyes.

He knew that he would not be falling asleep for a long time. “Jarvis, lights,” Loki said quietly. The last artificial light drained from the room. Loki turned his head to the side and stared out the windows, curling his fingers softly along Tony’s back.

Several things had hit him at once as Tony had proudly shared the city with him. The first was guilt. He had planned to annihilate this city with no thought of the people in it. Tony could’ve died and it would have been his fault and he wouldn’t have cared. Wouldn’t have known what he was missing out on. The thought was agonizing. Then he felt curious, and relieved, and homesick. Mostly though, he had felt pleased that Tony wanted to share it with him.

Tony had that effect on him.

The wrinkles along Tony’s face were so much softer in sleep, when he wasn’t weary. He was breathing in slow, shallow breaths against Loki’s chest. Loki wondered how Tony had charmed and persuaded his way into getting them into this room. He smirked a little, brushing his hands against Tony’s hair, careful not to wake him.

He had caught Tony’s anxious side glances in his direction all day. His fingers stilled. There was a sort of peace in the electric glow of the city. Not like Asgard, with its golden lights and seamless precision. This realm had a messy, striving way to it, but its effort was endearing. Loki closed his eyes and breathed in. He smelled Tony’s shampoo, the citrusy scent from the glasses, and the detergent from the blankets. It was alright.

He let Tony’s weight anchor him to the couch and his breathing keep time. He was comfortable. He was safe.

He checked to assure himself that Tony was asleep. Then he bent his head forward and pressed a kiss to the man’s forehead.



## Chapter 35

Tony remembered being carried to the other couch in the middle of the night and sleepily recognizing Loki's face. He remembered muttering something as Loki draped a blanket over him, and he drifted back to sleep. He remembered waking a while later and seeing that Loki was asleep on the other couch before falling back asleep.

He did not remember Loki picking him back up. So it confused him to wake up against the god's chest. Tony lifted his head. Loki was asleep. Tony grinned. He sat up a little more and felt a hand tighten against his back.

"So you're awake, Sleeping Beauty?" Tony muttered. Loki grinned but did not open his eyes. "Were you cold?"

"Yes," Loki said. Tony watched as his thick eyelashes pulled back and revealed fond green eyes. Loki let Tony pull himself up closer. He smiled languidly as lips met his cheekbone.

The adoration on Tony's face was as plain as day. It was vexing in the way it wormed in past Loki's defenses. Loki was never quite prepared for it.

"It's kinda weird not to wake up in your room," Tony said. Loki's finger stroked against his back. "Did you sleep okay?"

Loki's hands cupped his face for a moment. Tony couldn't read the emotion there before Loki pulled him in, lazily parting his lips. If it hadn't made Tony feel so cherished, he would've thrown a quip at Loki about morning breath. As it was, he didn't want it to stop.

Loki's hands had just slipped inside his shirt when Tony's phone buzzed on the table. Tony jolted, recognizing the text tone after the vibration. He balanced himself against Loki's chest to lean over and grab it. His hand accidentally slid into Loki's stomach with too much force.

Loki coughed, missing the way Tony's eyes lit up at the text. "Sorry, jeez, sorry," Tony said, catching the side of the couch and sitting up. "You alright?"

Loki wiped away a tear, coughing again. "I'm sorry," Tony said, bending down to kiss his forehead. Loki glared at him. "I've got something that will make up for it."

"Yesterday," Tony said brightly, "Steve and I talked about a little prison break for you. He was going to handle talking with Clint so I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but as of this morning, you can go on any floor that Clint doesn't use." Tony typed something back to Steve, sitting up and straddling Loki. "It's not everything, but it's my room and a few of the spare floors, and your room of course—" Loki sat up so fast that he smacked right into Tony's forehead. "Ahhahaowww," Tony whined, clutching his head.

Loki could feel his heart thump in excitement. He pressed his cold fingers to Tony's forehead like a compress. "I am no longer confined to that room?"

"Nope," Tony confirmed. He tossed his phone back onto the table. A smile pulled up into the corner of his mouth as Loki stared at him.

A weird sort of laugh whimpered from Loki's throat. "They—" A shiver jolted down Tony's spine at the next diseased laugh. "Me. They're letting me—"

Tony was debating how to respond when the look on Loki's face abruptly dropped. "They think me not a threat," he said in a near whisper. "Without magic I am not worth keeping." He dropped back onto the couch with a dismal moan.

Tony rolled his eyes. "No," Tony said. "No one's stupid, Loki. You could destroy the whole tower if you wanted to." Loki grinned up from his tangled curls at Tony's twisted encouragement. "I've seen you work a knife," Tony said. "It's not because you're not threatening. It's because a charming someone made a compelling case for you."

Loki met Tony with a heavy stare. "I trust you," Tony said. "So don't threaten anyone or plastic wrap all of the toilets or something and make me look like an ass, alright?"

"Was that still up for contention?" Loki asked with a smirk.

"Jackass," Tony said. He shoved his hands up Loki's shirt and wriggled his fingers.

"What are you doing?" Loki asked. He was half annoyed and half genuinely curious.

"You're not ticklish?" Tony asked. "That's weird." Before Loki could ask he let out a groan. "And disappointing. I wanted to watch you squirm."

Loki shoved a hand against his chest, trying to sit up. "I'm sure you'll get another chance, Stark."

"Promise?" Tony asked as Loki shoved him down onto the couch while standing up.

Loki glanced down at him, raising an eyebrow. "Is that a yes or a no?" Tony called out after him. Loki shut the bathroom door without an answer. Tony sighed loudly. "Fine," he said.

Loki found him picking through the food on the counter when he came out. "Grab something," Tony said.

"What for?" Loki asked.

"I want to show you the lab," Tony said with the enthusiasm of a child. He grabbed a bakery box and shoved it into Loki's hands. "Come on."

Tony went into the lab more eagerly than he had in months. Loki followed a few feet behind him, studying everything. Tony pulled up the screen with Jane's files on it. "I wanted to show you—" Tony stopped when he looked back at Loki.

Loki was staring at the drawings of the scepter that Tony had taped to the wall. There was a soft, thoughtful expression on his face. Ordinarily, it was the kind of expression that Loki would try to hide from Tony. The god stepped closer to the wall, reading his familiar handwriting beneath the sketched design. He recognized the pages that he had drawn the design over. He had been certain that Tony had dismissed them and thrown them away.

Tony let him have the moment.

"I'm a fan," Tony said. Loki shrugged, walking to Tony's side like the drawings were nothing but a minor curiosity. "I was thinking that maybe you could explain this too." He pointed to a chart. "How does that equation work?"

"It's been transcribed wrong," Loki said. He reached up and poked at the hologram. It dissipated.

A drawer rattled as Tony pulled it open.

“Use this,” Tony said, handing him a digital pen. “It’s easier.”

Loki corrected the equation with a blunt flick of the pen. He scrolled down and began fixing something else. He started explaining the engineering aspects to Tony, waiting patiently at his questions. It was the hottest thing Tony had ever heard.

After a while Tony felt compelled to state the obvious. “You know a lot.”

“Of course,” Loki said. “I was the son of the royal family. I had an extensive education from the best teachers.” He paused, tapping with the pen. “Thor could explain these to you as well if he wanted. Our parents were not content with lazy children.”

“What was that like?” Tony asked tentatively. It was unusual for Loki to broach the subject on his own.

“Frustrating,” Loki said. He grabbed a diagram and tossed it across the room. Its blue hologram hung there for a while before Loki spoke again. “I thought that because I showed far more aptitude and ambition that my parents would choose me to carry their legacy. I would have made an excellent king had they only given me the chance.”

Tony suspected that the next three diagrams were tossed for the hell of it.

Loki wrote something viscerally with the pen as his level tone limped along with an angry edge. “Thor eclipsed me in everything. I had no understanding of why I could not gain their favor. Had I known that I was only a frost giant that they’d stolen for political gain, I may have thought differently.”

Tony knew Thor’s perspective on the matter. They had talked about it, on one of the rare nights that Thor was on Earth and not at Jane’s. They had both been a little drunk, but Tony remembered well. “What would you have done if you knew then?” Tony asked.

Loki licked his lips. His pen stilled. Tony knew when the pen began again it was only because Loki was stalling without an answer.

“It is over and done with,” Loki said. “They are not family.”

Tony scratched his neck and glanced up towards the ceiling. “Did you...enjoy ruling Asgard and what not? Because I was sort of thinking that there might be a place for you here.”

Loki’s head turned ever so slowly to face him. His arm stayed frozen in place, the pen poised. Tony met his eyes with steady determination. “With my company and your knowledge, we could change things here,” Tony said. “And Jane too, of course. She’s kinda a big deal with this sort of stuff.” Tony grinned. “But I think we could do it. It’s not a realm,” Tony said. “But it is a business empire.”

Loki’s eyebrows twitched, but that was his only reaction. He kept his face perfectly still. Tony recognized the look. “You don’t have to decide now,” Tony said. “I just want you to know that there’s a place here for you.” He swiveled the chair around to face an illuminated screen instead.

Staring at the back of Stark’s head, a slow smile crept up onto Loki’s lips. He returned to files, contented simply that Tony had asked him.

“And we’d work something out about getting you access to the whole tower. Outside. Everything,”

Tony said. He didn't look up from the screen. "It's...it's just like this right now because it's complicated with Thor and everything."

"That will change," Loki said.

"Do you know something I don't know?" Tony asked.

"No," Loki said. "I just know him."

Tony turned around, but Loki was busy pretending to be engrossed in a diagram. He returned to the files with a small smile.

Hours passed unnoticed. Loki approved of how quickly Tony learned and began quizzing him on the concepts that Midgardian science lacked. Tony had insights that he'd never considered. After a while he realized that Tony had been rewarding him for sharing by offering him strawberries and yogurt coated pretzels.

He was content working in the lab with Tony. It was a relief to have something to think about finally, and Tony was good company to keep.

It was late afternoon when Tony asked, "Wanna call it a day?"

"We've only just gotten started," Loki said. He was mildly surprised. Tony had told him about extensive work habits and spending too much time in the lab. He'd been prepared to be the one to drag them out.

"I need to be a little better about keeping track of how much time I spend in here," Tony said. He got up, stretching. "Besides," he said, sliding his hand over Loki's and stealing the digital pen, "I thought I should give you the tower tour."

Tony tossed the pen aside and wrapped his arms around Loki's waist. Loki grinned, watching him suspiciously. "Come on," Tony said. "Set me up so that I can make a dirty pun on tower or tour."

"No," Loki said. He leaned his weight into Tony, forcing the man to catch him. He laughed as Tony struggled to right them. "Let's go," he said.

"Seriously," Tony said. "I had some great innuendos ready to go."

"I'm sure I'll be hearing them later anyway," Loki said, walking them towards the door. Tony chuckled.

"You will," Tony promised. "You will."

## Chapter 36

Tony rolled over in bed, expecting to collide with a warm body. He rolled over again. Nothing. Tony opened his eyes. The bed was empty.

He sat up. His bedroom was empty. “Jarvis, where’s Loki?” He asked, throwing his feet over the side of the bed.

“In the lab, Sir.”

“Doing what?”

“He appears to be working on something.”

Tony considered that for a moment before deciding that it was bad. Definitely bad.

Loki glanced up from the table when Tony came in but kept working. He didn’t seem guilty or mischievous, but he was an excellent liar, so Tony didn’t take that observation too seriously. Loki had the projections up. Dummy was right behind him, helpfully offering a series of office supplies that Loki ignored. Tony hadn’t been able to figure out why Dummy had taken a liking to the god.

There was a welding torch on the desk beside where Loki was toying with something. He had several jugs with miscellaneous chemicals in them beside him, as well as a series of tools. Tony took a few steps closer. Loki heard him sigh and then a drawer rattled open.

Tony kicked a plastic crate over and nudged it until he was beside Loki. “Turn this way,” Tony instructed, stepping up onto the crate. Intrigued, Loki turned.

Tony had a pair of safety goggles in his hand. They were sky blue with gold trim along the edges. It wasn’t a design Tony would’ve bought for himself, but they were given to him as a promotional item. Tony slid them over Loki’s face. If it was possible to look attractive in safety goggles, Tony mused, Loki was pulling it off. The blue played against his dark hair in a way that would’ve been completely appealing if Loki weren’t glowering at him through the lens.

“If you get hurt it’s going to hurt like hell,” Tony said. He tilted Loki’s head in his hands and then playfully snapped the elastic band. Loki breathed in a hiss.

“Since when were you compliant with safety rules,” Loki complained. He adjusted the goggles with a scowl.

“Seriously,” Tony said. “If you get hurt, it’s going to be Bruce that takes care of you.”

“I’m fine,” Loki said.

“What are you doing?” Tony asked, leaning to get a closer look.

Loki kept him held back with an outstretched arm. “It is not completed,” Loki said.

“I see that,” Tony said.

“You don’t even know what you’re looking at,” Loki said knowingly.

Tony's face flipped into an awkward grin. He'd been caught. "Why don't you tell me then," Tony said, trying to make it sound enticing.

Loki grinned but did not concede. When Tony realized that he wasn't going to get an answer, he stepped down from the plastic crate and kicked it back towards his desk. "How long have you been down here?"

"Three hours," Jarvis answered for him.

"Ah, it seems that Jarvis is still capable of tracking time," Loki said, his voice dripping with false enthusiasm.

Tony didn't notice their bickering. He was too fixated on the gem Loki was fidgeting with. He kept trying to walk around Loki and get closer, only to be held back. When he went around the front of the table, Loki moved the items on the table to make it less visible. Loki felt like he was trying to hide his test from a cheating classmate. "You did not bring breakfast," Loki said.

"There's a coffee maker over there and stuff from yesterday," Tony answered. He tried prying past Loki's defenses by sneaking around the side.

"It astounds me that I am expected to wear these," Loki said, tapping on the goggles, "while you carelessly careen towards my workspace." Tony's mouth dropped open. "Do not," Loki said. "Go and get us something. I am famished." He saw a flicker of anxiety in Tony as the man glanced at the gem. "No harm will come of this," Loki said. "Now go."

"Yeah," Tony said. "Like I—"

Tony didn't know what it was about the tired look Loki gave him that made him shut up, but it worked. "What do you want?" Tony asked, switching subjects.

"You choose," Loki said.

"Okay," Tony said. Even as the elevator doors closed, Tony watched, hoping to figure out what the gem was. The elevator hummed as he ascended. "Jarvis," Tony said. "Keep an eye on him."

"If I must," Jarvis said.

"And Jarvis?" Tony asked. "I need you to put limits on the time that I spend in the lab. Don't let me pull all nighters in there again." Tony raked his fingers through his hair. "I don't need that habit back just to make the same mistake."

Tony cleared his throat and started thinking about Loki in safety goggles instead. They had spent the past three days down in the lab. Even when Tony was out at meetings, Loki was in the lab. He hadn't finished working through the files, but Tony didn't think it would take him an entire week to complete that. He almost thought that Loki liked the lab more than he liked the lab.

Tony had been neglecting the lab, and it felt right to be back in there. He hadn't spent much time there over the past year.

Loki set the last piece of metal around the gem. It was a simple blue gem, centered in a silver disk that was not entirely unlike Tony's old reactor. A metal thread attached to the top so that as a pendant it fit squarely in the palm of Loki's hand.

Loki held it up to the light, admiring the way it caught the electronic haze around him.

He slipped it into his pocket. Dropping the goggles on the table, Loki walked to the lab doors.

Loki doubted that Tony's teammates would approve of him staying unattended in the lab. He wondered if Tony was hiding it from them or just blatantly breaking the rules. Tony hadn't mentioned it and Loki didn't ask. It was better to beg forgiveness.

Instead of going back to Tony's room, or one of the sterile guest floors, Loki decided to visit the room that had been his. Dread crept inside him as he walked down the hall. He had not returned to it since the day that Tony pulled him out.

Loki shoved the security door open. The room had not changed.

The floor was strewn with debris. Books lay on their sides or splayed open. Clothing was either wadded up or flung over piles of things. There was a shallow path to the closet. Tony must've made it retrieving things for Loki. Some of his clothes were in Tony's room now, a fact that neither of them had brought up.

Loki wasn't sure why it surprised him that the room was still a wreck, but it did. He had expected someone to clean it up. He nudged a heavy book out of his way and began to wade into the room.

The food that had been left had begun to rot. Loki plugged his nose. He thought to berate someone for leaving the room this way and then realized there was no one to direct that towards. He couldn't expect Tony to clean it up.

His eyes fell onto one of the tailored Asgardian garments Tony had ordered for him so long ago. It lay crumpled on the floor beneath a takeout box and broken plate. Staring at it, Loki felt a weight settle into his chest.

He was struck by an immense guilt for the state of the room.

He remembered his rage and his anguish, but as he looked towards the bed, he recalled Tony's flushed and smiling face. He saw the book that Tony had been reading when he woke, and the tablet Tony had forgotten about by the nightstand, and one of Tony's shirts beneath the bed. He tried to hold back the self-loathing and shame it triggered, but that was as hopeless as ever. He was supposed to be above remorse. Loki squeezed the gem in his pocket.

Tony nearly spilled coffee across his chest as he shoved his way in past the security door. "What're you doing in here?" Tony asked. "Woah," he said.

The room was clean. Loki was sitting on the neatly made bed, watching him closely. "I was going to get someone to come," Tony said. "I just hadn't gotten around to it." He set a paper bag down on the counter.

Tony walked over to the bed and took a seat beside Loki, handing him a coffee. "So," Tony said. Loki's body rocked stiffly as the mattress adjusted to Tony's added weight. "Are you going to tell me what's up with the glowing pop rock you were making or am I going to have to guess?"

Loki slipped the pendant from his pocket. It dropped by the thread as he held it up, catching the thread between his fingers. The pendant rocked back and forth. "I made it to resonate," Loki said. He turned it over, then set it in Tony's hand. "There is nothing left of my magic, but I am willing to entertain the hope that it will recognize this."

"How did you make it?" Tony tapped at the gem, mentally flipping through the files they'd been

going through together.

“Magic or not, I am still resourceful,” Loki said. He opened his hand for Tony to set the gem back into.

Tony said nothing, knowing that the m-word was an open wound. He took a sip of his coffee and stared down at the ground. Now that he was here, he realized that he had missed this room. He missed knowing that Loki was waiting for him on the other side.

“I am eager to see how you will use the knowledge you find,” Loki said.

Tony pulled at the seam on his gray tank top. He had been far more caught up in figuring out how things worked than how he’d apply them. He flexed his bare arms and took another drink.

“You realize, Stark, that all of your technology will be obsolete?”

Tony paused. “As long as it’s my company making it obsolete, I can live with that.”

Loki grinned.

“What will that company entail?” Loki asked.

Tony glanced over at Loki. The god was watching him with unmasked curiosity. “Jane handed the files over, and you’re interpreting them, so credit’s due where it’s due,” Tony said. “But maybe we can start a subsidiary company.”

Loki knew that introducing Asgardian technology on Midgard would have consequences. He also knew that if he was at the center of it, there would be power there for centuries to come.

Tony didn’t care as much for the business side of things, but as Loki slipped into a series of questions about it, Tony couldn’t help but see how Loki would have been as an advisor to the throne. Loki’s voice took on a counseling tone, and he waited at just the right times with a practiced demeanor. Tony wondered how Loki had run things.

It was a long time before Loki stopped his questioning and stood from the bed. He threw the coffee cup away and walked towards the security door, ready to return to the lab. Tony lingered behind him for a moment before following.

An hour later, Jarvis called Tony away on an Avenger’s assignment. Loki stayed in the lab, eager to have something for his mind to play with. When he grew bored of translating files or adding notes, he experimented with the things he could find, or went through Tony’s own files. He was growing to like Tony’s idea of things more and more. There were other things to take care of first, but having a hand in Tony’s company was deeply appealing.

“I told you to keep those things on,” Tony said when he returned. It was late at night. Tony yawned as he pointed at the safety goggles on the desk.

“Since when have you demanded that I keep something on?” Loki asked, raising an eyebrow. Tony grinned, propping himself against the doorframe to stay awake.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Tony said.

Loki turned off the lights behind him as he strode towards Tony. Dummy held up a roll of tape as he passed. “He really likes you,” Tony said. Loki hit one of the elevator buttons as he joined Tony.



“Jealous?” Loki asked.

“A little,” Tony admitted.

He grinned sleepily at Loki as the god smirked, watching the floor numbers light up as they rose.

## Chapter 37

Loki stared straight up at the ceiling, his mind lost in contemplation. His sweat slicked hair had fanned around his face on the pillow. Against his bare chest he held his hand. He drummed his fingers along cooling skin. "Yes," he said.

Tony rolled over onto his stomach with a lazy grin. "You know," Tony said playfully, "most people say that *during*. Did your mind just catch up now?"

Loki rolled his eyes. He dropped his hand on the pillow beside Tony's face and toyed with a wayward section of umber hair. "I'll stay," Loki said.

Tony propped himself up onto his forearm, his eyes leaping from hazy and sated to clear and attentive. Loki just grinned at him. "You will?" Tony asked, uncertain that he'd heard correctly.

"Is your mind just catching up now?" Loki asked, pleased with himself. The bed groaned as Tony crawled over him.

"Say that again," Tony said against his neck. His lips fervently met skin as the words echoed in his ears. Pleased fingers combed through his hair, pulling him closer.

Loki's hands slid slowly down Tony's back, stroking over blunt bone and tight muscle. Tony sighed as Loki's fingers grazed over the curve of his ass. The sound of Tony's mouth sucking at his skin played in Loki's ears as his fingers slid into the slick of him left and still wet in Tony and trailing down the inside of the man's thighs. "Say it again," Tony muttered, and he obliged.

- - -

Bruce hovered awkwardly behind Natasha, waiting to get past her and open the cabinet. "Where are you headed?" She asked as she stepped out of his way.

"I got a call from a clinic that's short staffed today," Bruce said. He pulled a tea tin from the cabinet to take with him. "What're you doing here? Is there a shortage of secret missions?"

Natasha grinned. "No," she said. "Just interesting ones." Bruce shot her a good natured look of skepticism as he left.

The moment he was gone Clint walked into the room, carrying an armful of shipping boxes. He dropped them on the table with a thud and then walked over to the sink with a gruff hello towards Natasha. "You look exhausted," she said.

"The air conditioning in my room broke last night and it took me hours to fix it," Clint said. "I tried finding Tony to help but he was out, whatever that means."

"I can't remember him looking happier than in the last couple weeks," Natasha said. "Let him have some fun." She twirled the drink in her hands, watching Clint. He stared reproachfully back.

"I am," Clint said. "I'm letting that psycho run loose even though the thought of him lurking around this building unsupervised and crawling back into my head is giving me nightmares." That was the other reason that he wasn't sleeping, and something that he didn't have to spell out for Natasha. Clint set a glass down on the table and then split open one of the boxes. "I want to see Tony happy too, you know that." He took out an armguard and tried it out against his forearm.

“I know,” Natasha said. She watched as Clint struggled with the buckle. “Want to get out of here today and see a movie or something?”

“I could use a normal day,” Clint said. He tossed the armguard back inside the box. “Want to practice civilian disguises?”

“Only if mine can be more ridiculous than yours,” Natasha said.

“You’re always trying to show me up,” Clint said.

- - -

Clint removed his wig as he walked into the tower lobby. He’d definitely won their disguise contest. Natasha was a few paces behind him, already looking like her usual self. She saw Clint stop abruptly.

“Does something seem off to you?”

Clint’s voice echoed in the lobby. Natasha glanced around, but perceived nothing. “Something’s off,” Clint said. “Jarvis, where’s Loki?”

“Clint,” Natasha said softly, assuming that he was being paranoid. There was no way that she could know, as even Clint didn’t, that there was a flicker of Loki’s magic still trapped inside his mind. It sung out in agony, giving Clint a deep sense of unease.

“On the primary guest floor,” Jarvis replied. Clint began walking towards the elevator.

“Clint, you probably shouldn’t go up there,” Natasha said, jogging to catch him. “It’s fine.”

“Can you trust me on this?” Clint asked, pressing the floor button. Natasha stepped into the elevator with a resigned sigh.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” she said. “It’s that I don’t think it’s a good idea. You’re not going off of anything and we literally just walked back inside.” The silence between them made the elevator stuffy as Clint refused to reply.

They could hear yelling even before the elevator reached the floor.

- - -

“You do not know what he has done,” Thor said, straining to hold back from downright bellowing at Tony. “Do not stand in the way. I do not wish to bring you harm.”

Tony had wedged himself between Thor and Loki. He looked nothing short of vicious, despite his disadvantaged height and how frail he looked in comparison. “How many times am I going to have to tell you not to take my stuff?” Tony shot back.

None of them noticed that Clint and Natasha had arrived in the elevator.

“Tony, he murdered my father,” Thor said. “How can you defend him?”

“He has a place here,” Tony said. “You left him here sick and delirious and we took care of him.

You don't get to take him back. You did that to him," Tony's voice cracked with anger.

Loki had gone pale and silent behind Tony. Natasha saw a faint tremor in his posture. As she tried to work his angle, Clint brushed past her. "He's not in our jurisdiction, Tony. Let Loki go."

Loki's hands curled in against Tony's waist. He whispered something in the man's ear and then looked at Thor with dark, feral eyes. "I can find the All-father," Loki said.

"No," Tony said, trying to break from his grip. Loki just held him tighter. Clint interpreted it as Tony being used as a shield, but Natasha perceived it the other way around. "Things were just starting to be okay," Tony said. "And I'm not letting that happen to you again." Loki leaned down and whispered something urgently into his ear.

Thor's face contorted with grim recognition as he watched the two. Tony's face flexed between fear and desperation as he listened to Loki's lips at his ear, swift and breathless in their instruction. Tony stopped struggling and stilled, leaning his weight back against Loki. A wet sheen welled in his eyes.

Loki turned Tony around and held him closer. The others in the room felt intrusive despite the circumstances, recognizing how private and intimate the look between the two was. Loki broke it, leaning down and kissing Tony goodbye, fierce and shameless. Tony's heart was pounding, his head spinning, as Loki stepped away and stood beside Thor.

"Let us take our leave, *brother*," he said.

Tony's eyes did not leave him once as he vanished in the golden light. Emotions played openly across Tony's face. Loki's was cold and braced for the journey ahead. Only his eyes betrayed him as he stared fervently at Tony, burning the image of the man into his mind.

Tony did not see that Thor watched him closely, his face a mingle of anger, pity, and shock.

When they had vanished, Tony remained glued to the same spot.

Natasha grabbed Clint's wrist. "Give Tony some space," she said quietly. Tony was turned away from them so that they could only see his back. His shoulders shook involuntarily.

"It's better this way," Clint said. "You're better off without him."

"Get the hell out," Tony snapped. He rubbed at his face, anger washing over him as he heard Clint's voice. It sounded distant, as if Clint were calling to him through a tube.

"Come on, Clint," Natasha demanded, tugging at him. He jerked his wrist back. Clint had understood, in a logical sense, that Tony and Loki were together. He assumed that it was a lusty, meaningless fling. He could comprehend that, or at least tolerate it. He could pretend it wasn't real and ignore it. That was easy.

Actually seeing that Tony cared, in person, so much—Clint felt utterly betrayed.

"Don't you have any pride? Don't you remember who he is? I mean, fuck, Tony." Clint couldn't hold back the words from tumbling out of his mouth. "I watched that miserable bastard murder people for fun. He used me to murder people for fun. He's the reason the Chitauri happened. Did you forget that?"

Clint couldn't actually see the room he was in. He could only see Tony kissing Loki goodbye, over and over again in his mind. "How can you actually be in *love* with *him*?" Natasha walked past, making her way over to Tony. "You could have *anyone* you want," Clint said. "Why does it have to be *him*?"

Natasha stood by Tony's side, staring straight ahead while quietly asking something. He nodded, answering too low for Clint to hear, a rage building over the grief that was currently winning.

Tony took a long, hard breath. "What are you even doing?" Clint asked. "I don't know who you are anymore."

Natasha turned around. "You've said enough, Clint."

"No, I don't think I have," Clint said. "Everyone's enabling Tony. He shouldn't be hanging around with that bastard. Loki is just using him, like he uses everyone else. And don't act like Thor is the bad guy here. He's way too lenient on Loki. He never should have dropped Loki here for another god damn second chance anyway. What does Loki have to do before you get that he's only out for himself?"

"You can get the fuck out," Tony said. "And never speak that way to me again." When Tony turned around, it was a look murderous enough to strike fear into anyone. Natasha pushed Clint's shoulder back towards the elevator.

The gesture broke the fog. Clint stopped hearing his own trauma scream inside his head, and for the first time since stepping in the room, saw Tony fully. He swallowed hard as he followed Natasha into the elevator. She was too angry to look at him.

Tony sunk down onto a couch, allowing the first tear to fall now that no one could see him. He felt something hard in his pocket but was too agonized to pay it any attention. For a while Tony sat there, dazed and angry as heat slid down his cheeks.

"Jarvis," he said finally, "where's Steve?"

"He is at therapy with Mr. Barnes," Jarvis answered. "Shall I contact him?"

"No," Tony said, standing up. He felt the sharp pain in his pocket again. "Figures," Tony said as he reached into his pocket, expecting to find a quarter or usb drive. Tony felt a little better now. He didn't recognize the shape as he tugged it from his pocket.

Tony looked down into his palm to see Loki's pendant wink back up at him.

Tony thought back through the day, trying to place when it could've gotten there. Then it hit Tony. Loki, clever pick pocket that he was, must've slipped it inside his jeans as they said goodbye. Tony slipped the thread-like chain over his head.

The pendant fell against his chest, a reassuring weight.

Tony wiped his face. He felt utterly powerless, but he wasn't going to listen to that. He went down to the lab that he'd been sharing with Loki the last couple weeks. As he pulled up electronic screens and moved Loki's cold tea aside to make room on the desk, he felt driven.

## Chapter 38

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki felt metal circle his wrists the moment they materialized in Asgard. As he held out his hands to inspect the new weight, he found that the simple manacles were laughably tame compared to his imagination.

There was no knife at his neck or sword in his back. Only Heimdall was there, and he seemed far more interested in Thor's composure than Loki's.

The gatekeeper elected to say nothing as Thor nudged Loki forward.

Loki stepped swiftly, proudly walking out in front of Thor as though his hands were not shackled.

"You are wise enough to know that escape is futile," Thor said huskily behind him.

"How charitable," Loki said, not looking back.

Thor muttered something to Heimdall, staying behind. The lack of concern grated against Loki's nerves. Thor thought him so nonthreatening that Thor did not even bother to stay close. Heimdall had to be aware of his missing magic. They had probably laughed at his misfortune together. Loki decided to try using it to his advantage.

Yet just before he could escape Thor's sight, Volstagg stepped forward from the shadows, blocking his path. "I would relish the slightest opportunity to pay you retribution," he said.

"I am certain you would," Loki said. He heard Thor's footsteps approach. Loki smiled cruelly, taunting him. "Perhaps," Loki said, loud enough for Thor to hear, "that would be retribution for missing me, your beloved king?"

Thor was at Loki's side a moment too soon for Volstagg to retaliate. Thor said nothing. He just pushed Loki towards a long corridor. Loki would've preferred for Volstagg to attack him. This corridor could lead to the dungeons, or worse.

It was better to suffer before then. To hold off whatever was to come.

Loki's eye twitched. He steeled himself, bracing for his fate. Already it hurt to think of Tony, to remember something good. He absently traced a scar on his wrist, his finger sliding alongside the cuff.

He had known just exactly what he was getting into when he left Midgard.

Thor said nothing as they walked. He would not even glance at Loki. Though Loki knew that there were many reasons that Thor would choose not to look upon him, he was sure that the cause was far more recent. Thor walked gruffly, breathing too heavily.

When they passed by the corridor leading to the dungeons, Loki's dread doubled. Worse than imprisonment, then. Perhaps it was time to start bargaining. He had the one thing they lacked, and had failed to find, after all. It was still his to use, as it had been meant to be all along.

A thin bead of sweat rolled down the back of Loki's neck, forcing him to shudder. He willfully ignored the weakness. His body could remember agony all it wanted. He would not.

The silence grew heavy as Loki braced himself and Thor paced ahead. When they had nearly reached the end of the long corridor, Thor turned to the right. Loki's heart stopped.

It was a direct route to the throne room.

"You wish to parade my defeat before Asgard," Loki said. His bitter voice echoed down the corridor.

"If I did," Thor said, "you would not be undeserving. That, however, is not my intention." He turned around, waiting expectantly. Loki glared at him with blatant skepticism. "You should move quickly, before the evening council comes. Unless you wish to parade your defeat before them?" He grinned, raising his eyebrows.

Loki sneered at him and took a long, swift step down the corridor.

They walked side by side into the throne room.

The first thing Loki noticed was that the gash in the ceiling from Gungnir was gone. In fact, none of the carnage from before remained. The room had been made anew, as if its history had never been. He recognized nothing.

It was designed to suit Thor, favoring the god's colors, with a homage to their parents built into the design. It was exactly the sort of throne room that Thor would have reigned over from the beginning. Yet more than anything, perhaps, was the distinct absence of Loki. The design made it feel as though he had never existed.

His gaze drifted out over the long hall. It was devoid of anyone but a few guards. The tables in the distance were set for a reception. His chest grew heavy. How many days had he spent seated on that throne, staring down the same hall? How many nights had it filled with people, calling him king?

Thor's blunt nudge at his shoulder pulled him from the reverie. Loki began to walk again, but the reprieve from his own thoughts brought something to his attention. At the far end of the hall, seated at a long golden table, was a familiar brunette.

She was pouring over something, taking notes and muttering to herself. "Ah," Loki said loudly. "I see that—"

Thor shoved him further towards the side of the hall. "Do not," he said.

It was too late. Jane had heard them. Loki reigned back the triumphant grin his lips so desperately wanted. He could see surprise unfurling on her face. So she had not known of his coming, then. Perhaps she had not known of Thor's departure. "It is only that Tony—" Loki said, emphasizing the name. Thor shoved him towards a corridor, plastering his hand against Loki's mouth before he could finish the sentence.

Thor's eyes were rife with threat, but Loki's gaze drifted instead to the corridor. It was all too familiar. This was the corridor of their youth. The next door in this corridor belonged to Thor. Then it was his own.

"Feeling nostalgic?" Loki asked the moment Thor released him. The blonde did not answer. Instead he tugged the door to his room open and waited for Loki to follow.

Loki paused in the doorframe. The room had not changed much over the years. It held the same scars of childhood—a dent in the ceiling from an overzealous duel, a tapestry singed by lightning,

and a box of old weapons in the corner. Why had Thor held onto them? “Be seated,” Thor said.

Loki contemptuously looked at a gilded sofa. He took a seat with a haughty clink of his cuffs, setting them on display before him.

Thor let his eyes linger on the manacles to make a point. “You have earned those,” he said.

“Have I,” Loki replied.

“My father is dead or missing and it is at your hands,” Thor said. His voice wavered on rage. Loki knew this side of Thor well. When they were children, it would’ve been the warning that a prank had gone too far, and Loki needed to quit.

“He is just *your* father, now?” Loki asked, prodding him on. He had no intention of quitting today.

“How many times have you renounced our family, Loki?” Thor looked him dead in the eyes. They were intense and ominous, like a sky before a storm. Loki smiled out of discomfort. “How many times have you renounced us, just to accuse us of abandoning you?”

Thor could not contain the building rise in his voice. Loki was reminded of Odin. “You chose to let go and fall from the bifrost, Loki. You **chose** that.” Loki’s body was stiff and heavy against the sofa. His muscles clenched tight. “You chose to have us believe you dead. You *wanted* to be forgotten. I mourned my brother’s death.” Thor took a long, hard breath. “I still am.”

Loki’s foot twitched. He could hear the counterargument in his head, but Thor was not ready to let him speak. “How many wars have you begun, Loki? You left a wake of death on Midgard. You brought death upon Asgard in the failings of your rule. Jotunheim attacked in your absence, undoubtedly due to your antagonism.” Thor had risen from where he was seated, unable to contain himself. He paced. “I cannot understand how you see yourself as justified.”

Loki wet his lips, only to find that his mouth was dry. “Jotunheim never would have attacked if I had been left on the throne.”

“The throne is not yours to have!” Thor’s patience shattered. Loki’s face twisted into something angry and indignant. “You do not wish to be a part of this family. You renounced our mother, Loki, when it was she that kept you safe from the wrath of our father. You renounce me at every opportunity. You would rather I think you dead! I have mourned you twice now! Twice!” His booming voice rattled along the walls. Loki knew that anyone outside could overhear. “This is the throne of Asgard, Loki. It is the throne of my family. It is not yours to have because you do not wish to be a part of us.”

“I never would have had it whether I claimed to love you or not,” Loki said, standing. He could feel a stinging heat pool against his eye and damned himself for it. “I was never anything but a stolen child, raised to be a pawn of Odin. I was never of this family.”

“You were,” Thor shot back. “I loved you as dearly as a brother because you were my brother!”

“And now?” Loki asked.

“Now you are in a misery of your own making.” Thor turned his back and walked with heavy steps to a large, arching window. Asgard was dim outside, lit in rings of hazy light. Loki’s voice rose up, brittle and emotional behind him.

“I am only the monster Asgard made me be!”



“No,” Thor said. His voice fell into a weighted stillness so like Odin’s own lectures. “I will not hear your excuses any longer, Loki. I have always defended you. I have always given you another chance and now you have attacked or murdered my father. There is no end to your hatred, Loki.” Thor swallowed hard. He was being soft with Loki, even now. By every law and moral thought in Asgard, he should have Loki beheaded for his crimes, and yet he was still letting Loki live. The room was silent.

Thor stared out the window as he finally came to the question he truly wanted to ask. “How many times did I speak to my father as you?”

Loki’s reply was distorted. “Since Svartalfheim.”

Thor dropped his head back, letting out a heavy sigh. He closed his eyes for a moment. He had had long, personal conversations with his father since then. It stung in a wretched, aching way to know that they had been with Loki. “Why should I believe that you can find him?”

“I know where he is,” Loki said. Thor hated himself for the twinge of sympathy he felt seeing Loki so forlorn. The god had slumped back onto the sofa, his shoulders hunched forward and skin pale. His face was the ever vivid contortion of emotion that it was every time he was pushed too far and lost his composure. For all of his illusions and lies, Loki was never as immune to feeling as he thought he was.

Thor knew from the core of his being that there would never be a time that he would see Loki like this and not want to embrace him and reassure him. He would always want to be Loki’s older brother. He would always want to make things right for the little brother that adored him. Perhaps, he thought, that was the reason that Loki had gone so awry.

“Give me Gungnir and I will retrieve him. Then I’ll leave Asgard,” Loki said.

Thor felt a fresh wave of anger course through him as he thought of where Loki would go. “You will not return to Midgard,” he said.

Loki stood, his hands curling to fists at his sides. “I will not be kept here,” he hissed.

“That is not your decision to make,” Thor said.

“If you wish to know where the All-father is, you will give me Gungnir and you will allow me safe passage to Midgard,” Loki demanded. His voice was stern and dark.

“You are in no position to bargain, Loki.” Thor stood, taking a step towards the door. Loki took a step towards him.

“If you kill me, you will never find the All-father,” Loki promised. Thor’s fingers twitched reflexively, prepared to summon his hammer. “You kept me alive because you feared that I was right. You have searched and you have failed. I am your only option.”

“Not even Foster could aid you,” Loki tried. He could read Thor’s face easily. He knew he was right. “You have tried to keep the situation secret, have you not? It would not serve well for the nine realms to know that Asgard has lost its king. Let me guess,” Loki said. “Odin has conveniently fallen to the Odin sleep?”

“If you threaten Jane Foster,” Thor said, “you will regret it.” A cruel, assured smile slipped onto Loki’s lips. “The mortals are not yours to play with and use, Loki.” Thor took a step towards Loki that the younger god did not back down from. “The Man of Iron is not yours to play with.”

“Presume nothing,” Loki said through gritted teeth, “of my intentions towards Tony.”

“You have had nothing but contempt for them,” Thor said. “You wished to subjugate them. I do not care to hear how you wished to use him for one of your schemes.” Thor had words for Tony as well, but he set that thought aside.

“You know *nothing*, you blundering oaf.” Loki took another step closer. If neither backed down, in a few steps they would be at blows.

Thor chuckled. It was cold and hollow. Loki tried to place the expression, knowing that it was not one of Thor’s invention. Then he recognized it as his own. “You do not love him,” Thor said. He saw something feral break loose in Loki’s eyes. “You love no one.”

Thor wanted to hear Loki contradict him and say that wasn’t true, but not for Tony’s sake. He still wanted to hear Loki say that he had loved their family, even if it was said in spite. Instead he saw Loki devolving into madness.

Thor stepped back and swung the door open. Then he grabbed Loki’s collar and tugged. The Midgardian fabric snapped in the motion, breaking the thread along a seam. Guards were waiting in the doorframe.

They grabbed Loki’s arms and dragged him down the corridor, tossing him into his own room. As the door slammed shut, Loki recognized the magical ward illuminating around the frame. There would be no way out.

Jane was hunched over a stack of papers, but she could not concentrate. She worried for Loki. She knew what was said about him in the circles that were aware of his treachery.

She jumped when she felt a presence over her shoulder. Thor stood behind her, stiff and weary. He smiled, but it was painfully forced. “Hey,” Jane said gently.

“Would you walk with me?”

Jane rose from the table. Her back ached as she stood upright. She followed Thor down one of the familiar corridors and out into the gardens, making uncomfortable small talk. They passed along a hedge of ornately cut flowers. Thor cleared his throat. “Were you aware that the Man of Iron and Loki were courting one another?”

Jane smiled anxiously. She wrapped her arms across her stomach and pretended to be especially interested in one of the flowers. “Why did you bring Loki back?” Jane asked. No one had told her outright that she had failed to find Odin, but their lost interest in her had communicated it well enough.

“I cannot trust him, but I have no options left.” Thor slowed his pace to match Jane’s. It was too easy to outpace her, especially when he was upset. “And I am not ready to give up on finding my father.”

“Is...Loki better?” Jane asked.

“He is physically, yes,” Thor said. “He was...deeply unwell when I left him.”

Jane kept brushing the same lock of hair behind her ear, attempting to soothe herself. Thor had been too busy for her for weeks, and now that they were together, they were having the exact

conversation that she wanted to avoid. She had avoided telling him about Loki's captivity on Earth, and hidden the fact that she stole the book for Tony and Loki. "That's good," she said.

"By the end of the week he will find the All-father," Thor said. Jane nodded. She didn't want to ask how.

"Where is Loki?" She asked.

"In his room," Thor said. "It is best for him." Jane had the growing sense that Thor needed to talk to someone and had chosen her. "In the dungeons he could ally with other prisoners. Isolation is best. His room was inspected before he came. There is no means of escape, and new security measures have been made."

Jane was already thinking of ways to visit Loki, despite the tremendous guilt it gave her. She tried to make her questions sound disinterested. "Are you sure someone can't just walk in?"

"None would try," Thor said. "And he cannot leave." They walked past a fountain. The gurgling water was no louder than their somber voices. "I feel that room is the most secure for him."

Thor began to tell her a story of their childhood. Jane wasn't sure if Thor was confusing that brother for the current Loki, or mourning something that was. She slipped her hand in his. At times like this it was easy for Jane to feel sympathy for Thor. She missed him more now that she was living in Asgard. He was always overburdened with duties or needed by someone else.

The distance had only made Jane that much more aware of what an outsider she was. It had shocked her to realize that Loki had been right in the things that he said to her. Despite a few kind Aesir, Asgard would never truly welcome her.

Jane knew from the way that Thor held her hand they would not part ways that night. He needed not to be alone, and seemed to be seeking Jane's approval as he listed his justifications for Loki. It only made her feel more estranged.

In his room, Loki yearned for Tony. He was determined to regain his magic, and petrified of returning without it. He thought of the man and found that for the first time in his life, his bed was too big.

## Chapter End Notes

blankets and tea for everyone ´ ˘ ˘ ) /  
hang in there

## Chapter 39

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki had lost track of time, seated on the floor and staring at the door, his mind nothing but a circle of promises to get Gungnir and return to Midgard.

He had slept poorly through the night. He woke up repeatedly only to forget and discover where he was all over again. When he reached for the phantom of Tony for the fourth or fifth time, he'd let out an agonized moan that was probably loud enough to be heard in the hall. By the early morning hours he gave up on sleeping and slunk over to study the ward on the door again.

He had discovered that there were several new wards in the room, all for keeping him in. Many of his things were missing as well, stripping the room of anything that could easily be turned into a weapon.

It was not his room anymore. Loki could remember the days where it made him feel safe, where it was his very own place in the world. Now it felt too small and old, like a dirty pair of shoes that his feet had outgrown.

*Once again, I am trapped*, he thought. *No, this is different.* Loki brushed his thumb against his bottom lip, staring distractedly at the door. *Really?* He thought snidely. *Tony's not here*, a somber voice in his head replied. *This is dangerous.* Loki got up and paced a few steps back, crossing his arms against his chest. He sat back down on the floor and rested his back against his bed, propping his chin up on his hand as he stared at the door.

Though he wished it wouldn't, a memory of Tony began playing in his mind. Tony's face was shadowed in the dim light, apprehensively watching for a reaction. Loki had felt lips pressed to the corner of his mouth. Tony was wavering on an apology. Loki reached up with fingers that still trembled from the nightmare Tony had saved him from, desperate to bring Tony back and taste his lips before he lost the chance.

Then he was standing in front of a tiny closet, staring at a row of clothes, despairing over what he was supposed to be. He didn't understand the customs, he didn't know what Tony wanted or expected, and as he stared at those clothes he realized that he very much cared what Tony thought. The realization hit hard. He tried to deny it, to forget it, but he was still standing in front of the closet twenty minutes later trapped by indecision.

Over and over and over again, Tony had broken in past his defenses and humbled him. Loki didn't think that Tony was even aware that he'd been doing it. He thought of the engineer and wondered what Tony was doing now, if he was falling back into the state he had been in when Loki had first arrived. He could still hear Tony's fake laughter, masking discomfort.

Loki bit at his nail, unaware that it had started to bleed. He had to do something.

He began his mantra again, promising himself that he'd secure his magic and leave this wretched place forever. He had had nothing, and then he had Tony, and he was not going to give that up for anything, even if Tony seemed like something bright and easily broken by someone as wicked and undeserving as himself.

He heard Tony whisper something tender in his ear and felt a shudder down his spine, despite it

being only a memory.

Loki was exhausted and running on fumes. Dark circles protruded beneath his eyes, accenting how bloodshot they were. It was perhaps for this reason that he lagged noticing the door crack open. He didn't have time to hide himself. He had barely scrambled to his feet when he saw a foot step into his room.

Jane Foster entered, swift and sparrow-like as she carefully shut the door behind her. Their gaze met.

There was none of the antagonism or irritation or spitefulness from before. He felt nothing but a surging, overwhelming wave of relief as Jane's hesitant brown eyes met his. It only felt natural to walk across the room towards her.

Seeing him was nothing like what Jane had expected. She thought that she'd find him standoffish or annoyed. She took feeling unwelcome for granted. Yet, when she saw him, it was like seeing an old friend for the first time in years. He was a familiar face among strangers. She felt relieved, like she'd finally found someone that knew her.

It was instinctive, the way he bent down as she reached up. Even though the hug was bony with an unfamiliar distance in the middle, they both held on a moment longer.

"How's Tony?" Jane asked quietly as his arms drew back from her.

Loki's face stiffened for a moment before he answered. "Fine," he said. Jane smiled on one side of her mouth, her gaze soft on him.

"Things make more sense now," Jane said. "Why he started changing when he did. We didn't really talk about you that much." She brushed her fingers back through her hair. "I don't want Tony to lose you."

For once, Loki didn't know what to say. They were still standing too close, and Jane took a polite step back, glancing uneasily around the room. "Did that book help?" She asked.

"Helping seems like a generous way to put it," Loki said. "It confirmed what I feared." "I'm sorry," Jane said. "You were right, you know." She didn't quite look at him as she said it, but she took a nervous glance back to see his reaction. "I didn't understand."

Loki considered Jane's appearance as he tried to recall what she was referring to. She was wearing the proper attire of a court member, but it was the same outfit as the day she'd appeared with the book. She had not mended the burnt singe along the bottom. Her wardrobe was not being curated, then, which was a grave indicator of fallen social grace. Someone should have been appointed to overseeing her appearance, whether she approved or not.

"I thought that maybe after a while of being here, Thor would forgive me. I thought that it was about everything that happened with the aether." She gave him a toothy, sad smile. "And then I decided that I'd learn as much as I could while I was here. When I gave you that book I was still hoping that things would be different. I still didn't understand."

Regret emanated from her, toxic and melancholic. "It was never about him being upset with me, or blaming me. He didn't blame me at all. He didn't need to forgive me. I just don't fit." She shrugged her shoulders, still attempting to smile. "I wish I'd listened to you the first time."

As Loki mulled over the right thing to say to the grieving mortal, Jane spoke, not seeking condolence. "Have you heard of Vera Rubin?" Her voice flitted upward. "I don't expect you to."

She proved that up to ninety percent of the universe is made up of dark matter.”

With a glum look to make sure he was following along, Jane continued. “Annie Jump Cannon created the first serious system for classifying stars. She was one of eighty women working at Harvard, mapping the universe, and all of their work was accredited to one man. Today it’s still called the Harvard system.” She was upset and speaking too quickly. With exhaustion, Loki was struggling to keep up with her train of thought.

Jane glanced out the window, as if proving to herself that she was standing in a foreign realm. “Cecilia Payne discovered what elements made up stars. Chien Shiung Wu disproved the conservation of parity law. Jocelyn Bell Burnell discovered the signals we call pulsars. These were incredible scientific advances,” Jane said, passion crackling across her voice. “And those women weren’t given credit for their work. They were overlooked.” Jane tugged at the frayed hem of her dress. “I want my legacy as an astrophysicist to exist,” Jane said. “I want to be remembered.”

“Not because I want fame,” Jane said, “but because I’ve done something that deserves to be recognized.” She paced a little, unsettled by an emotion she couldn’t control. “I’m *living in another realm*. I can learn all of this and then I can take it further,” Jane said. “I can do so much.”

“But I will never be wanted or accepted here,” Jane said. “I’ll never be recognized.” Loki had a certain feeling that Jane had needed to say this to someone else for a long time. “And my research was stolen and used by Shield on Earth, and a lot of what I bring back will probably be taken as well...” Jane’s voice trailed off.

“When I had the aether trapped in me,” Jane said, her stare intense upon Loki, “I had all of this power that I couldn’t use. I was just a pawn for everyone around me. I *never* want to feel that powerless again.”

She dropped her hands down and out from her sides. “*I never* want to feel that used and that powerless again.” Her lip twitched, like she was hopelessly trying to stop herself. “I was dying and Odin just said to send me to Earth because he thought that was where I belonged.” She bit back her tongue, thinking that she had no right to complain about Odin in front of Loki. She turned away, pushing out a heavy breath. “I thought it was him, but that seems to be the default feeling for Midgardians here,” she mumbled.

“Anyway,” Jane said. “I’m sorry,” she said awkwardly. “That was...a lot.” She let out a sigh, then smiled placatingly. She hadn’t meant for it to all come tumbling out.

Loki was smiling. It was a pleased, intrigued grin that reached his eyes. “What?” Jane asked.

Loki let the smile hold onto him a little longer. It felt good, and he was a little thrilled that he got to be the one to tell Jane. He also felt mildly guilty that Tony would not be the one to tell. “Oh,” he said. “You’ll like what Tony and I have planned.” Jane’s face was a mixture of surprise and suspicion. “Tony wants to start a company managing the advances that are brought to your realm. He has the business resources, I have the knowledge of Asgard, and you have the mind to advance both. We’ve been working on it.”

Jane’s eyes lit up so bright that it was almost painful. Only in comparison did Loki realize how truly miserable she had been before. “Really?” She asked. Loki nodded.

Jane tried stifling her joy but it came blaring out in her words. “With his resources, I’ll never have to worry about research funding again, and we can protect our findings...” She beamed at him, lighting up all over again. Loki thought that he was starting to see the woman that Tony had befriended and adored, and maybe even the woman Thor had fallen in love with.

“The files you sent had a lot of errors in their translations,” Loki said. “I will give you a list of things you need to find to take back so that we have adequate reference materials.” Loki paused. “I will get them,” he corrected himself. He had gotten used to not having magic. With it, he could just find them himself.

“Are they books or files?” Jane asked. “I’m in the library everyday. I never tried that hard to find Odin, I knew it was pointless if you didn’t want him to be found.”

Loki took that for the compliment it was, pride sparking in him. Foster was really endearing herself to him.

Jane went serious. She met his eyes with a drive not unlike Tony’s ambition. “You need Gungnir,” Jane said. “Thor said you asked for it.”

“We shall both need Gungnir,” Loki said. He looked at Jane with her tattered Asgardian attire and resilient Midgardian spirit and knew that he could not leave her here. “The punishment will be severe if you are found in this room.”

A wry smile appeared on Jane’s lips though her eyes stayed hopeful. “I’m practically invisible,” she said cheerfully. “No one will notice.”

Loki stared at her, stern and unyielding. “Please give me the list,” Jane said. He didn’t answer right away. “It makes more sense for me to get things now, instead of when we’re fleeing.” Loki licked his lip and then in worn patience decided that it was best not to argue.

He walked over the shelves and took down a stack of paper. He found a pen after some searching and Jane watched, rapt, as he wrote down a series of subjects and files.

Jane slipped it inside her dress. “If I bring you Gungnir, will that be enough or do you need something else?” Jane asked. Loki raised an eyebrow.

“Gungnir is all I require,” he said. “I will obtain it. You do not have to retrieve it.”

“If we can’t get to it,” Jane said, already thinking ahead. Now that she knew what was waiting on Earth, entertaining the idea of staying on Asgard seemed unnecessary. “If something happens, I know of a way out.”

“That is not an option,” Loki said.

Jane smiled nervously. “We should consider the possibility that we might not get it.”

“I am not leaving without it,” Loki said. “I came for it.”

Maybe it was something in the way that Loki said it, or maybe it was just that Jane was perceptive, but she turned to him and said, “Tony loved you without your magic. He’ll still be in love with you when you get back, magic or not.”

She didn’t say it to sound preachy. She said it as a matter of fact, and hearing it stopped the frantic wheel spinning in Loki’s head long enough for him to relax a little.

“So you’re staying on Earth then,” Jane said lightheartedly. “I never would’ve called that.”

Loki looked at Jane and then decided that there was no way to answer that but with a Tony-ism. “Yes,” he said. “I really fucking hate this place.”

Jane returned his grin perfectly. For a moment they held it together. “I’m going to go cause some chaos,” she said. “Try not to get too jealous.”

“I’m already wearing green,” Loki said. He waved a hand in front of his shirt to demonstrate, smirking at Jane. Then he let the humor fade. “Take only what is on the list,” he said. “Gungnir will not go unguarded, especially after I have made my intentions clear.”

“I know,” Jane said. She wavered, not ready to leave. Loki seemed to want her to stay just as much, but they were both painfully sensitive to how risky this meeting was. “We’ll make it back home,” Jane said. “It’s my turn to be right, after all.”

“Perhaps it is,” Loki said. Jane took a step towards the door, watching him until she was forced to turn and slip through the doorway as quietly as she came.

The moment her absence struck, the room was unfamiliar again. It felt infinitely quieter. Loki could not even content himself by looking through the things that had once belonged to him. They were someone else’s now.

He resumed his post watching the door, considering how he was going to get his mortals out of this predicament, and fervently hoping that they didn’t harm themselves in the meantime.

## Chapter End Notes

Jane had some bands and actors on her walls growing up, but mostly she had print outs of astronomers and astrophysicists she admired.

Thanks for reading!

...I think I'm giving myself a thing for a Loki/Jane/Tony science friendship. ˘ ( • ω • ;; ˘ )



## Chapter 40

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clint sat at the kitchen table, his foot propped up on the chair across from him as he stared at the refrigerator. At first glance, it would be difficult to discern that anything was wrong. Clint looked like he was simply in mission mode, monitoring the perimeter. Inside he was fuming.

Natasha had refused to take his side again, and it was driving him up a wall. She cut him off whenever he started ranting about Tony. Sometimes she just left, other times she would say something sharp.

She had never refused to take his side before. Now she would say things like *Clint, clearly Loki owes you an apology and did something horrible, but that doesn't excuse the way you're treating Tony.* or *This isn't about sides, Clint* in her most didactic tone, as if it could be about anything else.

If they supported Loki, they didn't support him.

Clint heard the doors open behind him and hoped that it wasn't Natasha walking in.

Bruce said nothing as he walked past and opened a cabinet. He seemed to be in a good enough mood, Clint decided. Bruce took out a tin of chai mix. "I bet you feel relieved," Clint said. Bruce's motions slowed. He was listening. "Not to be worried about that bag of cats lurking around downstairs."

"I was never that concerned," Bruce said with indifference. He set a mug in the microwave to heat water. He didn't want to wait for it to boil in a kettle while Clint was like this.

"Well, I guess there's still that hole in the floor from where we got him last time," Clint said. Bruce felt that the microwave was not working fast enough. "I never thought he'd be staying here. Maybe we should've made the hole a little bigger, huh? Given him a place to stay?"

The microwave dinged. Bruce took the mug and dumped a spoonful of chai mix in, clinking the spoon with unnecessary force. Clint paid no attention. "Though I suppose Tony would've been running around with the sick fuck twice as fast—"

Bruce turned to face Clint. He did it just slow enough to be authoritative. "I'm getting angry," he said.

Clint's eyes went wide. A little of the color drained from his face as he stared at Bruce, bracing for a flurry of green at any second. His heart beat too fast. The kitchen was too far from the bunker, and damn if that bunker wasn't Loki's room, the bastard—

Bruce laughed. It was a cold, hard chuckle, but a laugh all the same. Clint thought he could see a flicker of green in the man's eyes even as he grinned, acting amused. "Actually, on second thought, I think I'll be fine right now," Bruce said.

Clint could feel the adrenaline drop off, exhaustion sweeping through his tense nerves. He tried to scoff, to roll his eyes at Bruce, but the moment Bruce grinned Clint tensed again. "But I will be angry," Bruce said. "If you want me to slander Tony with you. You're the one that's got a problem with him."

Clint leaned forward towards the table, crossing his arms against his chest. He dropped his foot down from the other chair. Bruce walked towards the door, but stopped just beside his chair. “If you don’t face that anger,” Bruce said, stirring the spoon in his mug, “it’s going to take you over.”

Clint was left alone at the table, staring at the refrigerator again.

“Hands and feet to ourselves,” Tony said like a school teacher, batting Steve’s hand away from a very ordinary looking metal sphere.

“How does it work?” Steve asked for the fiftieth time that day. Rhodey chuckled beside him, fascinated more by how Steve had managed to remain fascinated through the never-ending parade of Asgardian technology that Tony was showing off.

Tony’s explanation was interrupted by Bruce walking in, drinking from a mug. He took a seat at the computer chair that had become his over the past few days. “You stole my thunder,” Tony said as he sat down. Bruce shrugged.

“I don’t think your ego needs the help,” he said.

“I’m offended,” Tony said with a grin. He opened the metal sphere, allowing Steve to marvel at the mechanics inside. Steve gave him a look, like he could’ve done it himself, and Tony just grinned wider.

For the first few days after Loki left, they’d hovered around Tony like vultures, anticipating a meltdown. Yet Tony seemed brighter than ever. He worked like a madman in the lab, and had roped Bruce into helping him with science projects.

Tony was cheerful and snarky during the days. It was only the nights that gave him trouble, when he had nothing to focus on but the empty space beside him in the bed.

“What’s that?” Rhodey said, pointing at a pendant hanging up beside Tony’s computer. Light flickered across the gem. Tony turned around, following the direction Rhodey pointed.

“Oh,” Tony said. He’d stopped keeping the pendant in his pocket and instead started hanging it up in the lab while he worked. He only wore it on his neck at night. “Loki said that he made it to recognize his magic. I think it was supposed to help him find it.”

“Recognize it?” Rhodey asked. “Did he forget what it looks like?” He grinned, and Tony knew Rhodey was playing with him.

“You got me there,” Tony said. He turned back to showing them something else, but Rhodey’s words would not stop nagging at him. Why would Loki need to find his magic? He knew where it was. He knew how to get it back.

“Sir,” Jarvis interrupted. “Your meeting for Stark Industries starts in twenty minutes.”

“Thanks,” Tony said. “Alright, you heard him. Show and tell time is over, kids. Time to go home.” He watched them, expecting someone to whine, but they didn’t.

When they’d left, Tony grabbed the proposal he had typed and set inside a folder. He’d spent a lot of time going over it, making sure that it was exactly the sort of thing that would impress Pepper. He wanted to prove himself.

“Here goes,” Tony said, slipping the gem into his pocket.

In nineteen minutes he was sitting in a conference room wearing a suit and opening the cap on a fountain pen. Pepper walked in precisely on time. She seemed startled to see Tony there, waiting.

“What did you want to see me about?” She asked, taking a seat across the table from him.

“I want to open a sister company to Stark Industries,” Tony said. He flipped open the folder and pushed it towards Pepper.

She glanced down at the project proposals, scanning figures and objectives. For a while Tony watched her read the papers, recognizing the familiar way her lips twitched as she found something intriguing.

He saw her lips twitch, and realized, suddenly, that though it was familiar, he didn’t *miss* it anymore.

Pepper pushed her ponytail back over her shoulder. “Where did you get all of this information?” She sounded more interested than suspicious.

“A private researcher,” Tony said. “I would like to hire them on as a consultant, in addition to a small team of researchers.”

Pepper hummed in acknowledgment, flipping a page over to go back and reread something. God, how Tony used to adore that hum. It felt almost comical, suddenly. Tony couldn’t remember why he’d liked that hum at all.

“I’d still like to have Stark employees handle the marketing side of things,” Pepper said thoughtfully. She started taking notes on a lined pad of paper.

Tony agreed, realizing as he did that she was wearing the blue shirt he’d loathed so much. He hadn’t even noticed it, and they had been sitting there for half an hour. It would’ve killed him before to see it, to think about it, to remember it rumpled on the floor the night that they officially cut things off.

And it didn’t hurt so much now. In fact, it seemed a little melodramatic, thinking about it.

“I don’t want to flood the market all at once,” Tony said, pointing out something that she was writing. She adjusted a chart with his suggestions.

“Do you want me to start the hiring process for finding someone to manage it?” Pepper asked, her eyes glued to the proposal.

“No,” Tony said. “I already have a candidate in mind. I want to use Stark Industry’s resources, but it’ll be fully self-sufficient. No two AM phone calls because someone forgot to turn in payroll, I promise.”

Pepper smiled, faintly. She scratched something out. Tony watched her read while answering her questions. She seemed so much smaller to him now. She wasn’t imposing anymore. She also didn’t radiate the way she had before.

Tony didn’t *want* the way he’d wanted.

He didn't *need* anymore.

He could almost feel the weight being lifted from his shoulders as he sat there, realizing that he had managed to move on. He had never thought that it could happen, and yet it had. It was. Tony let out a deep sigh. If Pepper found it strange, she didn't comment on it.

It was a relief, it really was, Tony thought. Here he was, sitting in a meeting for an entirely new company, a company that would revolutionize the world, because he'd fallen in love with someone else. He almost felt grateful that Pepper had burned his former life to the ground. *Almost*. If only because it made this, something better, possible.

When the meeting came to an end, Pepper was impressed, Tony knew she was. It didn't affect him. She was there to do her job and oversee business because she was brilliant at that, and he wanted to use her expertise. That was all.

Tony realized that he was finally ready to forgive her, and he did.

He felt like he'd dodged a bullet now. He'd dodged a stagnant life that wasn't working for either of them and was nothing but familiar.

He was grinning when the meeting came to an end. It startled Pepper. "What?" She asked.

"Thanks," Tony said, rising from the table. He didn't elaborate what the thanks was for, and she didn't ask anything else. Only her eyebrow flinched as she watched him leave, her face faintly confused.

Tony felt the pendant give a feeble start as he rode the elevator past the kitchen. Clint had to be in there, then.

It had taken Tony eleven or twelve times to notice the faint vibration from the pendant. It was so faint that even walking would overpower it, but it was there. Once Tony noticed it and connected it to Clint, he became much better at recognizing the vibration.

He would've liked to experiment with it, to see what it could do, but he wasn't speaking to Clint. The archer had given him nothing but surly looks and passive aggressive comments, directed at other people in the room but meant for him.

Natasha had told him that Clint felt betrayed, like everyone was taking Tony's side, but she didn't really seem to have the patience or will to be a go between. Not that Tony was asking her. She seemed to think that Clint needed time alone to sort his emotions out.

He hung the pendant back up in the lab and pulled up a file. "You'd better hurry your ass back," Tony told the gem. "Or you're going to be late for work."

He returned to working, and would until Jarvis shut everything down and sent him to bed. He treated the pendant much like he treated Jarvis, chatting away at it without really expecting a response, as if Loki would hear.

"You'd better be okay," Tony muttered, slipping it over his head as Jarvis shut the lab down. "Don't do something stupid." He started walking towards his bedroom, but ended up crawling into Loki's bed instead.

He flipped on the television and pulled the other pillow into him, rolling onto his side. He watched

the television light fade and flicker against the closet doors.

It was then that Rhodey's words finally connected to the thing that was nagging at him. Loki didn't need a pendant to recognize his magic. Tony did.

#### Chapter End Notes

Just this chapter is a brief interlude to Midgard, and then we're back to Asgard.

## Chapter 41

Jane pressed the tome against her chest, the edge of its heavy cover jutting against her soft fingers. She hesitated outside the door. With another glance over her shoulder, assuring herself that she had not been followed, she slipped inside.

She saw Loki in the midst of sitting up as she stepped in. He stayed seated on the floor. His face set with grave concern.

“It’s fine,” Jane said brightly. “I just wanted to ask you about this,” she said, walking to where he sat. He stared up with her with exasperation as she decided to sink down onto the floor beside him. She flipped the book open.

“Could this not wait?” Loki asked. “There will be plenty of time for that, you risk far too much.”

Jane pointed at a formula on the page, waiting expectantly. “I have to know about this,” Jane said. Her eyes were bright with a curious urgency for discovery. Loki sighed, taking the book from her lap.

His eyes were heavily bloodshot again, his skin sickly. It did not seem as though he had been sleeping. He began explaining the formula in a tired, flat voice. Jane’s chipper mood made him feel slightly less sluggish, as if her enthusiasm was wearing off onto him. By the end of the explanation his voice was no longer flat.

“Wow,” Jane said when he finished. She took the book back and stared at the page in awe. Loki didn’t understand why he found it endearing, but he did. “Incredible.”

“Could it not have waited?” Loki asked again.

“No,” Jane said happily. “Anyway, no one comes looking for me in the afternoon.”

“No, but they may come looking for me,” Loki said. Jane fidgeted, adjusting the weight on her legs as she sat. She glanced at the door and then looked back at the page. Loki took the opportunity to study her court robes.

She was dressed in blue fabrics again, with coral accents and silver metals. Though this dress lacked the singe across the bottom the other had, it also seemed worn. He thought the sleeve was fraying but he wasn’t sure.

“I’ve collected everything on the list,” Jane said. She kept her eyes fixed on the book. “Now it’s just a matter of—hey,” she said, swatting Loki’s hand away. “Did you even ask if you could touch me?”

Loki let go of the sleeve he’d been studying. The pattern was dated, as he suspected. He let out a sigh. “You can’t just grab people,” Jane chided him.

Loki rubbed at his forehead, inwardly cursing the fiery Midgardians and their tenacity. No Asgardian below his rank would even think of reprimanding him, let alone get testy over such an innocuous gesture. He rubbed at his dry eyes, muttering an apology.

“Hey, are they feeding you?” Jane asked. It was so at odds with everything else that was happening that he was jolted. Loki looked at her and felt something bend in his heart, bowing beneath the pressure of an unexpected kindness. “Because I can sneak something from the kitchen and bring it

back.”

“That has been attended to,” Loki reassured her. Jane smiled doubtfully, but calmed at Loki’s certain stare. “You mustn’t wear those robes,” Loki said.

Jane was taken aback. She scooted a little further away from him, out of the reach of a prying hand. “Why?”

“They do not suit your standing,” Loki said. “They are too old and outdated. The court is very sensitive to rank. Even more so than the royal family, they are attentive to the robes they wear. Robes show your status for all to see.”

Jane shrugged. She furrowed her brows as she turned the book over and shut it. “Why should I care?” She asked.

“Your attire should stand out,” Loki said.

“Isn’t it better if no one notices me?” Jane asked offhandedly.

“No,” Loki said. When Jane heard his tone she found herself considering his advice a little more seriously. “They may not acknowledge you, but they have not forgotten you either. Do not let their objections be easy for them to make.” Jane looked down at the robes but didn’t fully understand. “You are a representative of your realm, a consultant, and the lover of the crown king. Do not let them forget it.”

Jane stared at the floor. She’d avoided the pomp of wardrobe consultants to chase after everything else. She couldn’t bear to waste hours crafting her appearance when she had a realm to explore. “Now go,” Loki said. “Create no further risks for us.”

Jane stood up, brushing herself off. “Okay.” She didn’t know what else to say.

Just before she reached the door, she heard Loki say, “we shall be leaving soon, Jane Foster. There will be time for research then.”

She grinned at him, and was pleased to find it returned. Loki shut his eyes as the door closed. Foster’s visit had distracted him and lessened some of his weariness. Though he warned her, he was glad she came. It made life easier for both of them.

Jane hurried out into the corridor and took big, lunging steps towards the end of the way. First, she decided that she’d go steal something from the kitchens anyway. What a wonderful thief Asgard was making of her, she thought. Then she’d— she bumped hard into muscle.

“Jane!” Thor exclaimed, grabbing her shoulders as she blinked, dazed. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Jane said, her face going red with guilty embarrassment. Thor attributed it to their collision.

“Did you come to look for me?” He asked. Jane grinned, grateful that the excuse had been made for her.

“Yes,” she said.

“I am afraid it will have to wait for later,” Thor said. “I have things I must attend to now.” Jane smiled, taking a backwards step away from him.

“Sure,” she said. “No problem.” She took another step away.

He did not like to see her back away so quickly. “I am sorry that I have not been able to give my time to you as of late,” he said. Jane shook her head.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I’ll see you later.” She turned around and left before he could argue.

Thor turned the corner and continued to his brother’s door, his mind awash with the things he was about to say.

When Loki heard the door open, he had a brief moment of hope, thinking that Jane had returned. It came open with too much force for the delusion to last. He stayed on the floor, his back resting against the bed.

“Loki,” Thor said. His voice was firm and unaffected. He waited for Loki to stand, but when he did nothing, Thor walked until he stood in the center of the room. He kept a distance between them, not trying to provoke anything. “You must reconsider.”

“Reconsider what?” Loki asked. He slipped his fingers together and set them in his lap, glaring at Thor like a snake about to strike.

“Your poisonous dreams,” Thor said. “Can you not consider how this pains me?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “As much as you consider how it pains me.” He smiled, loose and snide. Thor broke eye contact.

“I did not wish for it to be like this,” Thor said.

“A little late for that, don’t you think?” Loki asked. He had abandoned his oath of love for his once brother ages ago. If Thor had come for resolution, he would not give it. “I have made my demands and condemned myself to exile. There is nothing left to say.”

Thor could not have disagreed more. “Our mother did not wish for us to fight. I think we dishonor her memory.”

Loki’s eyes rolled so hard they might have stuck. “Why do you stall?” He asked. “What is this hesitation? Do you wish for me to apologize to you? To make amends for my wrongs?” Loki thought he had hit the mark, but Thor was too stoic to tell for certain. “You wait in vain,” Loki said.

Thor took a heavy breath. Once the shock from Loki’s retrieval had worn off, regret had pooled in him over what could have been. The warriors three and Sif had grown weary of his hesitation. “We will bring Gungnir tonight,” Thor said. Saying it made him feel in control again. “And if your answer is not to our satisfaction...”

“You’ll kill me?” Loki suggested. “Dear me. I’ve been threatened with death by you as many times as I’ve died.”

Thor turned and left, aggravated and exhausted by Loki. He knew they would not get anywhere today.

It did not surprise him to see Sif and Fandral waiting outside the door. Fandral had his arms crossed and leaned back with one foot propped up against the wall. Sif had her arms crossed as well but looked far less comfortable. “You cannot continue to grant him audience,” she said. “He means nothing of what he says.”



Thor did not nod his head or disagree. "There is nothing left to do," Fandral said. "You have been far too lenient with him. He will never change."

"Imprisonment is more than he deserves," Sif said. "Asgard would have his head if they knew the extent of his crimes."

"Look," Fandral said. "We grew up with Loki. We liked him." Sif huffed a breath in disagreement and Fandral shot her a dirty look. He turned his charm back towards Thor. "He helped us in the past. But those days are over. He is not the Loki of our past."

"He murdered or imprisoned the All-father," Sif said. "You cannot be weak with him. Quit making excuses on his behalf."

"You are kind," Fandral said. "We know that. He knows it too. That is why he takes advantage of you."

"Just get on with it already," Sif said.

"We bring him Gungnir tonight," Thor said, just to silence them. He had heard this from them a thousand times since Loki's fall. He left, unable to hear their council further.

Loki stood by the window, waiting. Night had come well over an hour ago. He considered the possibility that Thor had been lying, but it seemed unlikely.

There was a knock at the door.

Loki smirked at the quaint gesture.

Guards filed in. "My," Loki said as two took his arms. "You've brought the royal guard. I'm flattered."

The warriors three and Sif followed closely behind Thor. "Save the speech," Loki said. "Bring it." He could see Gungnir nowhere, and it frustrated him beyond measure.

Loki felt shackles behind his back, linking his wrists together. His defeat on Midgard flashed through his mind as he felt the muzzle set before his face.

He kept his eyes trained on the open door, ignoring the rattle of chains and Thor's voice as he reiterated the terms of their agreement. Loki's heart pounded faster and faster, determination and resolution keeping the beat. The guard's grip on his arm tightened and he tugged right back.

Finally Thor nodded his head. Loki saw the golden scepter carried into the doorway, glinting as it was guided past the frame. He saw nothing but Gungnir, glittering gold.

## Chapter 42

Loki's fingers grazed across aged skin, hesitation gone as they morphed into a vice grip.

The raspy choke of air echoing in his ears gave him no feeling. It wasn't satisfying the way he had expected it to be. Frustrated, Loki let go. Odin's broken voice gurgled out, sending a fresh flood of annoyance through the god standing behind him.

Before Odin could react, Loki grabbed his arm, and they were hurtling through darkness.

His once father's body hit the frozen ground, rolling a distance in the snow before he stopped face up. For a moment, Loki felt nothing but the cold blowing at his back as he contemplated the body in the distance.

Odin coughed, shakily sitting up. He looked so frail, suddenly. Loki could not understand why it was pity that struck him instead of disgust.

When the once father turned to face him, he was not greeted with shock. No, the once father did not startle to see his dead once son standing there in the snow. It was disappointment that painted his face. Contempt. Exhaustion.

Loki could see his temper flaring then, as his once father struggled to his feet. "You will go nowhere," Loki stated.

"You have no say in that," Odin said. He evaluated Loki with blatant disdain. "What is it this time?"

"I will no longer—"

"Thinking only of yourself, as ever." Odin spoke over him. He turned to trudge away through the rolling slopes of snow.

"Your reign is over!" Loki bellowed. His voice echoed across the hills, crashing back on them. He took sharp, swift steps, puncturing the ice. Odin looked back over his shoulder as if Loki were nothing but a mere nuisance.

"You have no say in that," he said.

"That is where you are wrong," Loki growled, closing the distance between them. "You have used me for the last time, old man. Your time has ended."

Odin shoved out a gruff laugh. "And your time was never meant to be," Odin said. "Stop this foolishness, Loki. The world owes you nothing. You were meant to die."

"Was I?" Loki hissed. "Or did you see an opportunity and take it?"

"You are ungrateful," Odin said. "You are ungrateful and selfish." That old anger was in his eyes, but Loki wasn't intimidated by it anymore.

"You stole a child and used him for your political gain," Loki said with vitriol. "You raised me upon lies and made me to think myself a monster. And yet you ask me to be grateful?" Loki broke into a cruel smile then, grinning with condescension. He raised his eyebrows, tempting his once father to challenge him.

“I should have left you to die.”

“Perhaps,” Loki agreed. He let the mirth slip from his face into a callous mask. “I will not kill you, though I see how you tremble. No,” he said. “Death is far more mercy than you deserve.” Loki took a step back from Odin. “I shall leave you in the land of my birth, and bestow the same trick upon you as you did me.”

Odin did not feel his blood run cold, or the slow creep of blue along his flesh. A twitching smile crept up onto Loki’s mouth like a spasm. “You will be able to tell no one of your predicament, nor the memories that will plague you.” He chuckled, dark and throaty. “I hope you rot out the last of your days here, despising the monster that sits upon your throne.”

“I’ll relish every moment,” Loki promised. Odin found that he could not speak, let alone bellow at Loki the way he wanted. “Defiling the throne you loved, ruling the realm you meant to further upon my suffering.” Loki took a step back, cold winds whipping his furls of black leather out from him like a raven spreading its wings.

“Now you are the monster,” Loki said, and vanished.

Loki felt a cold bead of sweat roll down his forehead. He was standing in his bedroom, and there were constraints around him and—he remembered when and where he was.

Gungnir had been carefully set into his clasped hands, and flexing his fingers, he realized it was still there. Something else was pressing at him now, insistent and frenzied. Loki could feel it at his core, calling him home.

“If you remember, you may release Gungnir and then we will free you to speak,” someone said. Loki could not hear them over the frantic energy clawing at him.

Something was blocking it, and like a twig bracing as a dam against a river, the block snapped. Loki felt it surge inside him, crunching the enchanted fetters and chains that bound him like bones, littering the ground with chunks of twisted metal.

He heard one of the guards beside him cry out and let go, but he could process nothing else. Every sense was inundated by the symphony of magic rejoicing at its homecoming. It sang across his synapses, drawing life back inside him.

For the first time, Loki felt as though he could breathe. Exhaustion lifted as magic licked his wounds, repairing months of transgressions. Clarity graced the world.

The guards that had been posted beside him were wounded, and were already being carried away along with several others wounded by the shrapnel.

Those that were unaffected were standing at a distance, anxiously surveying the scepter in Loki’s uncertain hands. The god took his hands from behind his back then, lackadaisically studying the golden scepter. He made a show of it, pretending to admire the craftsmanship as the guards quaked in fearful anticipation.

“I think,” Loki said, “that it is time to renegotiate our terms of engagement.”

Thor had Mjolnir in his hand, at the ready. “Loki,” he warned.

Loki’s eyes flickered towards him, considering how he could use Gungnir to strip the hammer’s

power. He urged his magic to slip inside and amplify, but it just looped back towards him. He tried again, but then he discovered a slender fracture in the scepter's hilt.

Gungnir had split directly down the middle.

It was only a prop now. He enchanted it to hold itself together, but it would not conduct anything and held no power. He reconsidered.

"It is nothing that I have not already asked for," Loki said. "I simply want a guarantee that you will not pursue me when I leave Asgard." He glanced at Thor, studying the effect of his words. "When the All-father returns," he said, feeling satisfied with the hope that stirred in Thor's eyes, "I want reassurance that he will abide by this agreement."

"You have my word," Thor said.

Loki twirled Gungnir by the hilt as he stood tall. "It is not your word that concerns me," Loki said.

"How do we even know that you're telling the truth?" Volstagg asked.

"How do you know I'm not?" Loki asked, thinly veiling the threat in his voice. Thor stepped in front of the warrior, shrapnel crunching beneath his feet.

"Gungnir is in your hands and we have agreed on your exile," Thor said. "Stall no longer."

Loki's jaw set hard. He knew that Thor would keep his word, but if Thor were not the one in power then it would make no difference. "I want it written as law," Loki said. He snapped his fingers. The hard crack summoned a thin scroll of legalese. "I want a royal decree that cannot be amended."

"Fine," Thor said. He took it from Loki and handed it off. "Let us depart."

"Not until it is issued," Loki said.

"Send to have it overlooked and then I will approve it," Thor told one of the guards. "We," he told Loki, "will go to the Bifrost now."

Loki considered his position and then decided that leaving the room was better than staying. "How is Heimdall doing?" Loki asked flippantly. "I've wanted to pay him a visit, I just have not had the time." He grinned.

Thor ignored him and began to walk towards the door.

"You cannot let him leave without restrictions," Fandral said. "He doesn't even have the restraints to dampen magic."

"I have already made my decision," Thor said. Loki took a joyful step into the center of the room, smirking at Fandral.

"At least let us accompany you," Hogun said.

"Yes, please let your backup singers accompany us," Loki said. Thor raised an eyebrow. He looked from Loki to them and back again.

"Where will we be going?" He asked.

"Jotunheim."

The word hung in the air like static against silence.

Thor took a decisive step towards the door. The guards anxiously looked to him for direction, but Thor gave nothing and Loki simply walked past them. The warriors hurried to follow them through the corridors, Sif matching her pace to Thor's.

"You cannot go alone," she said. "He could attack you the moment you're alone. This is a setup."

"Could you say that a little louder, Sif? I almost didn't hear you," Loki said.

"The frost giants will not welcome you either," Sif said. "This is madness."

"If Loki wants his exile on his terms, he will carry out our terms of agreement," Thor said. Loki squeezed Gungir's hilt.

"Or he will stay on Jotunheim to make an escape," Sif said. Thor laughed.

"I am not worried."

It was all that Loki could do not to act out right there. Yet this was a game to be played carefully, and everything was in his favor. He wanted that guarantee if there was any possibility that they'd be bringing Odin back alive.

The procession to the Bifrost was a long, excruciating march. Loki tore at Sif's advice, making snide, snarky comments to vent his frustration. By the time they reached Heimdall he was fuming.

Heimdall looked him over with those unnerving eyes as Thor informed him of their destination. "All of you then," Heimdall said.

"No," Thor replied. "Only Loki and I."

If Heimdall thought it was unwise, he said nothing. It seemed that Thor thought he would be better at handling Loki on his own terms, without the warriors there. He dismissed them, along with the remaining guard, and waited for the scribe to come back with the decree.

Loki found the silence nauseating. Heimdall had dismissed them and was instead watching something far off in the universe. Thor seemed similarly preoccupied.

Loki turned Gungnir over, thinking of the realm he had to get back to.

When the scribe finally arrived, she gave Thor a brief verbal synopsis of the document and handed him a pen and stamp. Thor watched Loki while he approved the decree, as if he was proving his word.

Loki ran through his plans again as he watched the pen move. He could not afford to fail.

"Let's go," Thor said.

## Chapter 43

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bitter flecks of snow dotted the rough beard along Thor's face and melted down the side of his exposed neck. He shuddered, hardly matching pace with the lanky brother in front of him.

Loki's frame seemed different, composed of untuned muscle and mass. It was difficult to tell from the disguise he'd draped himself in the moment they landed. Fur and leather and metal.

Loki's gait hastened with each of Thor's approaching steps. The cold had no effect on Loki, and he had little desire to give Thor the chance to speak. He wanted to find the wretched All-father and be done.

Not a word had passed once they landed. Loki had only nodded his head for Thor to follow, and he obeyed as quickly as if they were living a thousand years prior.

The wind cut against Loki's face as he trudged across another barren slope. The snow drifts were deep. They had been walking for nearly an hour, but came across no one.

He wasn't sure what the population of Jotunheim was, let alone the lay of the land. He knew absolutely nothing of this realm, and he should have. He should have known where others lived, what mattered to them, what life here meant. He had been denied all of it.

Thor saw Loki's foot falter in the snow, but in the next blink it was over and the younger god was continuing his march forward as though nothing had happened.

Loki hadn't thought that there was something to miss of this realm before now. He'd foolishly stumbled, distracted by the realization. He shoved it away just as quickly. He was better than this wasteland. He was better than the monsters that lived in it, and infinitely better than the monster they had set out to retrieve.

Feeling warmer at that thought, Loki pridefully hurried through the snow. He held Gungnir higher, anticipating the moment that Odin would see it in his hands. Perhaps he would set it in Odin's grip only to watch with glee as his face broke in sorrow. Or perhaps he would take the halves and spear Odin and his son. Or perhaps yet, he would—"Loki," Thor's voice interrupted his thoughts.

He impatiently glanced back over his shoulder. "What?"

Thor grabbed the opportunity to catch up. He came to stand at Loki's side, his frozen cape flapping in broken waves as the wind tugged at the icy fabric. Loki took a delicate step away from the cape's broken flutter.

"You have told me nothing of your time on Midgard," Thor said.

Loki huffed and started walking. "How did you fare?" Thor insisted, swiftly matching Loki's pace this time.

Loki's shoulders pulled back tight. He clenched his teeth. "Loki," Thor said.

"You wish for me to inspire you with stories of my captivity?" Loki's voice came in a feral lilt.

“They are a kind race that you already knew,” Thor said. “Who better in the universe to watch over you?”

Loki shoved out a laugh. “Yes! What fond feelings I had for the pitiful mortals that prided themselves on my defeat!”

“You could not have stayed on Asgard,” Thor said.

Loki turned to look at him, letting his eyes profess all of the contempt he felt. “A kindness,” Loki said. “That is what you think that was?”

“Yes.”

Loki grinned joylessly, pacing faster through the snow. “You committed treason,” Thor said. “You know the punishment for that. Your imprisonment was—”

“Kind?” Loki spat back. He was searching Thor’s face again, but the older god would not give up anything. Instead Thor directed his attention towards the distance, waiting for Loki’s anger to subside.

“You are not exempt from consequences,” Thor said. “No matter your reasoning.” He began walking. He had no idea where they were going, but it did not take long for Loki to catch up.

Loki said nothing when he did. Gungnir was held between them then, as if tempting Thor’s hand. He ignored it.

Now Loki despised the frigid winds, and the hard ground slick with packed snow and ice, and the heavy weight in his hand. Every time he tried walking faster, Thor matched him. He focused on the distance, but he sensed that his magic surrounding the All-father was still a long way off.

“Tell me about Tony,” Thor said.

Loki’s mind froze for a moment. Hearing the man’s name jolted him out of the reality he was in, and back to a memory that hardly seemed real. Tony’s name seemed too secret, too otherworldly to exist on Thor’s tongue. “Ah,” Loki said. “That is what you were getting at. Do be a bit more blunt, would you?”

Thor fell silent. At first Loki thought that Thor was waiting for an answer, but as the minutes dragged by he had to conclude that Thor was not going to push for one. “The Man of Iron is none of your concern,” Loki said. They had been quiet so long that the statement felt out of place. “Your counsel is not wanted.”

Thor’s next footfall hit the ground harder than he meant it to. He braced himself, no longer cold as anger worked its way up to the surface. “He is my comrade,” Thor said. “And a Midgardian.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “A *Midgardian*.”

Thor heard the curious way Loki said it, but was unsure what the implication was. He loved the Midgardians deeply, as he gave his time with them credit for so much of his growth. Perhaps Loki meant it another way. “I know well of your contempt for Jane,” Thor said. “Their mortality does not make them your play things, Loki. Nor should Tony have approached you when you were unwell—”

“You have no right to call him Tony,” Loki said, eyes flashing with anger.

“He has asked me to do so,” Thor said sternly. “They do not hold to our customs.”

Loki’s jaw tightened as he imagined the scenario with more than a little envy. He tried brushing it off, attributing it to Tony’s casualness. “He is not here,” Loki said. “And you will not call him by that name.”

Thor stepped away. “I will call him by the title he insists upon.”

“You will not,” Loki said to Thor’s back. The god trudged on as if he knew where they were going. Loki watched, seething. His magic surged. It offered a thousand painful retributions, but Loki knew he could use none of them. “You know nothing of them.”

“I befriended them the first time you tried to slaughter them,” Thor said.

“Well,” Loki said, waving his hands out. “As you have tried to slaughter Jotenheim, I see no moral high ground.”

Thor paused, turning back slowly. “With you whispering in my ear the whole time.”

Loki grinned wickedly. He allowed his Jotun form to unfold, loathing it as he did, but choosing to spite Thor all the same. “Do I disgust you?”

Thor said nothing, his face still. “You are just like the rest of them. You would have done it with or without me,” Loki said.

“You are still my brother,” Thor said. “Jotun or not, you are my brother.” His face was flushed with the cold, ice melting and refreezing along his beard. His eyes burned as they burrowed into Loki. “I knew nothing of your birth and the lie of our parents. I loved you. I loved you before and after. I loved you when I came upon your invasion of Midgard.” He huffed out a heavy breath in frustration. “I forgave you all of your imagined slights. This is not about you being a frost giant, this is about you attacking our father.” It was all Thor could do to stay composed. His months spent searching for his father and managing the throne had not been kind to his psyche and he lacked patience.

“He is not my father!” Loki snapped.

“Am I not your brother?” Thor asked.

“You are not,” Loki said.

“We will be whether you like it or not,” Thor said. He took a decisive step in the snow, plunging forward again. Loki followed a few moments later. When Thor glanced back he saw that Loki had already reverted into his Aesir appearance, looking as sullen as ever.

Loki felt like the center of his chest was caving in on itself. He hated everything that they had made him to be, and everything that he was.

A pale yellow glow lit the cave, casting its hue across walls of carved ice. Odin rolled over, knowing well that it was the start of a hallucination of his late wife.

She visited him each day without fail, sometimes for hours on end. In the beginning, he had thought her real. The truth had been devastating.



For the first few weeks she was silent. At first he thought that she was sitting there in silent judgment, repulsed by what her husband had become.

He had accepted that, agreeing with her, but then one day he had been struck by a fit of anger. She was supposed to be loyal to him. She had no right to show contempt. He screamed and bellowed at the hallucination, but as he yelled into her unmoving face, he realized that it was not judgment at all.

His late wife simply watched him.

He got used to her presence, taking no more note of her than the icy crevices and barren land that surrounded him. Often he was alone. Once a pack of wolf-like creatures came near, but never encountered him. Stripped of power and incapable of communication, he had few ideas of how to escape.

“I don’t suppose you know a way out,” he had muttered towards his late wife.

It was the first time that she moved. Her head turned slowly, doll-like, towards him. Her lips moved out of sync, but as she spoke, her voice was as alive as he had ever known it to be. “Loki,” was all she said.

Odin grimaced, then renounced the wretched name.

“Frigga,” he said, but the hallucination had no interest in the name. He longed to hear her voice again, but she would answer nothing. He fell into the habit of speaking to her then, latently hoping that she would return the conversation.

This time was no different.

“Taking that boy was the worst decision I ever made,” he told the translucent Frigga.

“It was not,” she said. The reply shocked him. His heart beat harder, but he was no faster than his bitterness.

“An easy thing for you to say,” he said. “You are not the one he trapped.” She said nothing. Her silence coupled with her speech brought a new wave of anger, as if she was deliberately keeping out of reach. “What would it be then, Frigga?”

For once she smiled, but it was not from joy. She smiled as if he knew the answer already and she was only waiting for him to share.

“You are my hallucination and yet you criticize me,” he said. He let out a deep sigh, his weariness beginning to win. “If you were here I would have you talk some sense into that boy. You were better with him.”

“You have to go on without me,” Frigga said. He did not know if the sorrow he heard in her voice was a part of the hallucination or just his thoughts.

The corner of Odin’s mouth twitched. He turned away from her, casting his gaze instead on the glow against the walls. “What would I say to that traitor? He is a greedy, selfish boy that stole a throne he was unworthy of.” He glanced back at his late wife, unable to keep himself from the desire to see her reaction. She remained the same as ever. “Look what he has done to me,” he said, his voice trembling with anguish. “Look what he has turned me into.”

“I recall loving a baby that looked just the same,” said Frigga.

“That was then,” Odin said.

“No,” Frigga replied.

It was the most that the hallucination had ever spoken to him, and yet Odin found himself desperately wishing that it would leave.

“We failed him,” Frigga said. “I am sorry I cannot be there, but you must make it right for both of us.”

“In doing what?” Odin asked. He had told the hallucination a thousand times of his contempt for Loki, his regrets, his disgust. Maybe if he could figure out what it wanted it would go away.

“He is our son,” Frigga said. “Reunite our family.”

She vanished instantly, leaving him no room to argue. For a long time after he stared at the absent space.

“We are close,” Loki said, stopping. He scanned the area, listening to the insistent cry of his magic.

“Alright,” Thor said. They spoke in terse, clipped phrases, but they were speaking.

“Ahead,” Loki said, pointing at a series of hills in the distance.

It took little time for them to wander their way up into the hills. There were thousands of tiny caves carved by wind and ice, though few were large enough to hide in. Thor felt uneasy. It would be a simple place for an ambush. “There,” Loki said gruffly.

He walked to the mouth of a shallow cave where he stood stiffly, waiting for Thor to catch up. Thor found new strength as he hurried to Loki’s side.

Inside there was nothing but a frost giant. Thor’s good humor left instantly. “This is no time for jest,” he said. He spoke quietly, unwilling to wake it, but irritated none the less. Loki crossed his arms, staring at it with an intensity that made Thor apprehensive. “Leave it,” Thor said.

Loki’s mouth slipped up into a humorless smirk. “After all this fuss?” He asked. “I thought you wanted your dear father.”

Thor took a second look at the frost giant. Realization crept over him with sinking dread. Gravity felt stronger, the world too close. Struck dumb by shock, it was only the frost giant’s movement that brought him back.

At first Odin thought that the voices of his sons were a new, fresh hallucination to torture him. Then he smelled something organic against the cold air and sat up.

He recognized Loki first, solemnly glaring at him from behind a dense fur coat. Even before his first thought, Frigga’s spectral voice came, imploring him to mend their parental mistakes. His focus shifted to Thor. His son’s face seemed empty, as if he was realizing something he was never meant to.

Odin rose to his feet. “I did not expect to see my two sons.”

“That is because you only see one,” Loki said, turning so that Odin only saw his impatient profile.

Loki bristled as Thor's hand came to rest against his bicep. He shrugged it away, his eyes wide. "We are here," Thor said.

Loki rolled his eyes. "Yes, wonderful, shall we take a picture?" He examined the barren scenery. "Oh dear, it looks as though we are lacking in a photographer."

Loki's words met silence. He had separated himself long ago, and had nothing new to recognize about his family. For Odin and Thor, in separate ways, they were discovering with clarity just how far things had gone.

Odin saw two sons and his grieving wife, standing behind them. One son with a weariness that Odin had never witnessed on his gentle face, and the other holding the emblem of their rule with none of the pride or joy he expected to see. The guilt would not let him be, no matter how he tried blocking it.

Thor saw the full extent of Loki's sense of being an outsider with a deeper lucidity than before, and felt nothing but misery over the breadth of their family's fracture. The chasm seemed too wide to be fixed.

"Shall we find one on Asgard?" Loki asked, eager to move. The sooner they finished the deal, the sooner he would be back to Midgard. The other two were just standing there in stupid silence, doing nothing. Loki supposed it was shock, but he could not bring himself to care.

Thor reached out to embrace his father. Loki watched knowing damn well what would happen. Thor let out a sob of agony as his father tried to block him but made contact anyway, burning his son's skin.

"Touching," Loki said. His lip quirked up at his pun.

Thor wiped his face, taking in a shaky breath. He dropped his arm against his side, ignoring the pain. Odin sighed, weary and agonized by months of hallucinations and isolation. "This has gone on long enough," Odin said.

"For once I agree," Loki said. "Let's call Heimdall."

"Loki," Odin said. The god stilled at his name. "Our family cannot continue this way. It hurts Frigga."

"She's dead," Loki said, letting the words drop callously.

"Loki," Odin said. Loki rather thought that he seemed deranged. "We should have told you of your birth right."

Loki grinned wide, scoffing. "What? A few months as a monster and you're repentant? If I had known it was that easy I would have done it ages ago."

"We should have told you," Odin said.

"Obviously," Loki said. "I have no desire to listen to your groveling, nor your lies. I'll spare myself the trouble." Loki snapped his fingers. Odin's Aesir form returned instantly.

Odin was immensely frail, his muscles gone and skin loose. Thor stepped forward to assist him, but Odin brushed him off. "It is the truth," Odin said.

"Isn't it?" Loki asked with boredom. He flicked one of his nails. He coated them black, contented

that his magic responded to him.

“My son,” Odin said. Loki looked pointedly at Thor, waiting. He popped one of his nails against the other. “Hear my regret.”

“Loki,” Odin said.

Loki made a show of spinning Gungnir around, catching it so that it stood upright beside him. He trailed his hand down it, speaking as though he had no audience. “Your only regret is that I am not what you wanted me to be. You wished me to be a pawn, and regret that I am not. You only consider me when it conveniences you, that is, when I am inconveniencing you.” He rested his face beside one of Gungnir’s prongs, gazing lazily in Odin’s direction.

“Loki,” Thor said. “This does not have to be.”

“A few hours on Jotunheim and you both forget your place,” Loki said. He grinned toothily in a private joke, leaning his weight against Gungnir. “I am bound for exile, and you Asgard. There is nothing to be said.”

Thor leaned in to support Odin. This time he was too weak to protest. Frigga’s voice buzzed relentlessly in his ear. He could see the glow everywhere, obscuring even his sons. “You must give your forgiveness,” Odin demanded.

This time, both Thor and Loki heard the slip in his voice. Odin was not fully present. Involuntarily, they both looked to each other. The look exchanged was uncomfortable, fearful even. “We have certainly given you ours,” Odin said angrily.

Loki leaned off Gungnir, his eyes half-lidded and cat like. “Yes,” he said with a languid smile. “You certainly have.”

His voice dripped with sarcasm, but Odin received none of it. He smiled, incapable of keeping his eyes focused, and if Loki did not pity him before, he pitied him now.

“He needs a healer,” Loki said.

“Yes,” Thor said distantly.

Loki grinned up at the sky, waiting. “Heimdall,” Thor called. The light of the Bifrost enveloped them swiftly.

The moment they returned Thor called out for a healer. They left Loki standing there, unguided and unnoticed. His only thought was of finding Foster and getting out before there was time for that attention to shift back onto him.

“Tread carefully,” a voice said.

An apprehensive tingle shot down Loki’s spine. He recognized Heimdall’s voice behind him. “Stay ready,” Loki said without looking back. “I will return shortly.”

He took a long step towards a dark corridor, slipping into the shadows to find Foster.

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Happy Captain America day everyone.

## Chapter 44

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’m not sure what you’re expecting from me, Tony.” The man ended with a nervous laugh in the bottom of his throat. His uncertain eyes met the engineer’s stern ones with hesitant hope. This was the first and only opportunity he’d been given post-invasion and he did not want to lose it. “There’s not much that’s come out of my research since...” He remembered the bag of pills and the institute and what they’d called him. He stopped.

“Don’t worry about that,” Tony said. The pendant was buzzing like a hive in his pocket. It felt like it could detonate at any moment. “You’ll get the hang of it.”

Selvig glanced nervously around Tony’s lab, smiling in a nervous tick. There was a crash as Darcy knocked something over. “Oops,” Darcy declared loudly, uprighting a stand.

It only seemed to amuse Tony, which helped ease Selvig and take some of the attention off of him, so Darcy knocked something else over. She didn’t like it when Selvig got that pained look on his face. She knew what he was thinking about.

Tony pulled up a projection of one of the Asgardian files. Loki and he had worked through it already, but he figured that it would be a good test for Selvig. At the very least, it would distract Selvig long enough for Jarvis to finish assessing him. If he had a better understanding of what Loki’s “magic” was, he might figure out how to influence it. The best scenario was ridding Selvig of it. The worst, but most likely, was that he just learned a little more about it.

Clint and Tony were still busy avoiding each other or taking passive aggressive jabs at the other, so Tony knew that any tests on Clint were out of the question. Selvig, on the other hand, didn’t want to kill him. Not yet, at least.

“I need you to take a look over these,” Tony said. He placed a digital pen in Selvig’s hand.

Selvig’s mouth parted. Intrigue sparked. “Where did you get these?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Tony said. He heard Darcy snort behind him.

“You can tell him, Tony,” she said. Between the long conversation on the phone with Tony and watching Jane before she left, Darcy knew more than she let on. “Or I’ll tell him?”

Tony flashed his best press smile. “You may not like all of your coworkers,” Tony said. He acted nonchalant. “But our insurance policy covers counseling and conflict resolution so I think it’ll be fine.”

Darcy watched flat lipped as Selvig waited for Tony to explain. She raised an eyebrow. “So where’d you get the files, Tony?” She asked playfully. “How about a name?”

Tony was suddenly quite interested in the tablet beside him. “You say it or I am,” Darcy said.

Tony sighed loudly. He looked to Darcy for pity but found none. “The catch,” Tony said, “is that these files are from Loki.” He rushed his words, as if saying them faster made it better.

“Oh,” Selvig said. He looked to Darcy who just shrugged. “I thought he was dead.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “He’s got a thing for that.”

Darcy grinned. “He’s also got a thing for—”

“So this file,” Tony said loudly. “Could you take a look at it?”

“Well,” Selvig said. Though his voice sounded doubtful, his face gave away his interest. “I can try.”

“Great,” Tony said.

The shadows concealed Loki’s form as he ran along winding corridors, seeking Jane. Gungnir slowed him down, but it did not occur to him to leave it. His gait was odd and jaunted.

He sensed that Jane was somewhere close to the royal chambers, but without any magical markers on her it was difficult to tell for certain.

The corridors felt dirty and diseased, as if Asgard itself was rancid. It was not the building, but his perception. This realm had lost its worth.

He had to get out of this decaying realm and return to Midgard.

A trail of melting ice and slush followed after him. He only noticed the ache in his toes as he ran. There were guards posted at every corner, but he had learned to outmaneuver them centuries ago and paid them no attention now.

The closer he got to the royal chambers the harder it was to sense Jane. He had a murky sense of her being everywhere. Loki took a delicate step down the hall leading towards his old room. Perhaps Jane was waiting to meet him there.

His door was closed. He took a shaky breath. Returning to his room felt like defeat.

He took a slow step to stand in front of his door. With loathing, he decided that it was best to get it over with.

“You should not be here.” Loki bristled at the sound of Thor’s voice. The god was watching him from his bedroom door. Loki had been so wrapped up in his thoughts that he had failed to notice. “You were meant to leave from the Bifrost. Why have you returned?” Thor watched Loki carefully. “Could it be that you worry for our father?”

Bile lurched into Loki’s throat as he felt his stomach churn. He let on nothing. “I simply wished to take a few old belongings with me,” Loki said loftily. He glanced at the doorknob. If Jane was inside, he could not give her away by entering with Thor following. If he left the room to circle back to it, Thor would be suspicious. He doubted he would even have the free reign to do so.

Jane could go back on her own, he mused, but he knew the risk had too many variables. He wanted to make certain that she returned. He could not leave her to do it alone.

As Loki weighed his pitiful options, Thor held back a grin. For all of his illusions and tricks, Thor was certain he understood Loki. “They would not permit me in the medical wing,” Thor said. “Perhaps we can return during visiting times together.”

“Perhaps,” Loki stalled. He had turned his back against his door, guarding it. “I…” He smiled

uncertainly at Thor. It was just brief enough to convince Thor that he was genuinely upset. “I would like a moment to compose myself before then.”

Loki played it for all the sympathy that it was worth. He knew Thor would jump at the opportunity to brother him. “It has been a trying day,” Loki said.

Thor just nodded, saying nothing. Loki seethed. He was lying through his teeth, and he needed it to work, but he still hated it for how easy it seemed. How could Thor ever believe that he meant any of it? It was painfully obvious to Loki how flimsy the lie was, and it only demonstrated how willing Thor was to turn a blind eye. “Perhaps I will visit once more before I make my final leave,” Loki said.

His hand slipped around the doorknob, though he kept his face attentively on Thor. “Alright,” Thor said. Loki couldn’t gauge whether or not it was time to open the door. “I will expect you then,” Thor said.

Loki smiled stiffly. He turned his back slowly, dragging time out incase Thor thought of something else to say. When he heard nothing, Loki pushed the door open just wide enough to slip inside. He gently closed the door.

Jane was sitting at his desk, reading a book. Relief flooded him. At least now she was found, and escape was close at hand.

“Jane,” Loki whispered. She jumped, startled.

“Lo—” He pressed a finger to his lips and the words fell from her mouth. Water pooled at his feet as he held the staff limply in his grip. Jane leaned down and grabbed a bag. She pointed towards the door, nodding.

“Wait,” Loki whispered. He kept his back to the door. He would wait a few minutes for Thor to settle in his own room, then sneak them out. Jane had gotten up from the chair and was walking towards him. He noticed that she had taken his advice to heart, dressing herself in a way that would make the court writhe with envy. He smirked.

“What’s going on?” She whispered, adjusting the strap of the bag cutting into her shoulder. She stood close to him and kept her voice low. “It’s time, right?”

Loki nodded, glancing back over his shoulder towards the door. “I have everything,” Jane whispered. Loki nodded again, not looking away from the door and pressing his finger to his lips. Just a couple minutes and he could leave this room forever.

Jane followed his gaze towards the door, but perceived nothing. Jane had never seen Loki in a moment where he was not weary, but he seemed especially spent to her now. The realization gave her anxiety. She needed to be sure that Loki made it home. She couldn’t face telling Tony that something had happened to the god.

Loki couldn’t take a step back from the door without bumping into Jane. She hovered nervously beside him, watching the door only because he did.

“On second thought—” The door flew open. Instinctively, instantly, Loki pushed Jane back against the wall to shield her from the threat. She was smaller, perhaps he could turn and hide her behind him long enough to—“Loki?”

Whatever Thor had been about to do— apologize, confide, reassure— Loki would never know. The good will slipped from Thor’s face like a breath. He locked eyes with Jane, who peered out



with defiance from behind Loki's elbow.

The thousand little transgressions Jane had let slide swallowed up her surprise with a fury. She spoke first. "I'm leaving."

"What is this?" Thor asked, anger rushing in. He only looked at his brother, ignoring Jane. Loki shifted, trying to hide Jane behind him, but she was already slipping past. "Is this how you repay me?" Mjolnir rumbled in the distance. "To think you would seek revenge through toying with not only the Man of Iron, but my—"

"Thor," Jane barked. She shook, but was determined to force the words out anyway. Neither Asgardian was aware of the effort that it took. "I don't think that you—"

"The Midgardians are not your game," Thor declared. His stare had never left Loki. "This is low, even for you."

Jane's anger at being spoken over erupted. "It's not about him!" She yelled. "Look, I don't think you ever consciously had bad intentions," Jane said. She had finally startled Thor enough for him to look at her. "But I'm not staying here."

In his anger and exhaustion and shock Thor turned on Loki once more. "What have you done?"

Loki smiled viciously, ready to launch into snide remarks, but Jane was faster. "**I'm** leaving. **I** want to go." Her face had flushed red. Loki was no longer holding her back with his arm, but was blocked as she stood between them. Thor had to stare downward. "I don't think you get it, but I am *not* here as proof that you changed on Earth."

Jane couldn't believe that she'd said that, but now that the words were out, she felt brazen enough to try again. "I'm not staying on Asgard as a novelty."

"Jane," Thor said, his voice devoid of patience.

"No," Jane said. "I'm going back to Earth, and so is Loki." Her lip trembled. She had loved Thor, she really had. Despite what had happened, it was still hard. "This is goodbye."

Thor's gaze left her face to assess Loki's, as if Jane had to be lying. Loki was an excellent manipulator. He could have put ideas in Jane's head.

Jane felt Loki's hand at her shoulder blade. "It's time to go," Jane said.

"That is an unwise decision," Thor said. His head spun, and suddenly the most important thing was getting Jane to stay, regardless of anything else. He could figure it out later. He had been through enough that day, how could Jane leave?

"We're going," Jane said. She grabbed Loki's arm and tugged him towards the door, shoving her shoulder against Thor to make way. Loki felt a surge of endearment as the mortal bluntly shoved past his brother and grabbed him without any regard to the social mores she was crushing.

The disturbance had attracted attention, and Loki could see the outline of someone's armor as Jane strived for the door. Gungnir bobbed over their heads, swaying with the motion. "Stop," Thor said.

Bruce swiveled in the computer chair, studying Tony through his glasses. The engineer was remarkably cheerful. There had been no melt downs, no late night emergency calls from Jarvis. He

hadn't even found Tony passed out asleep on an unsuitable tower surface. Tony was doing remarkably well. He was thriving as he laid the groundwork for a new business. Jarvis kept him to a schedule, and Tony was compliant. With the normalcy, Bruce kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Tony was too busy going over Selvig's readings to notice Bruce. "Do you think that Selvig will stay?" Bruce asked.

"Hmm?" Tony asked. "Oh, yeah." He tore his attention away from an algorithm. "I would've hired him anyway," Tony said. "He's one of the few people that worked with the Tesseract and he handled Asgard's other screw up. If Shield was in better shape, they'd snatch him up." Tony cracked his knuckles. "This is just convenient."

The pendant was back around his neck. He had been wearing it against his chest more and more. "When Loki gets back, we can figure out the working situation."

Tony's attention was drifting back onto the charts, and Bruce wasn't saying anything. Loki had been gone for three weeks. The situation was starting to seem doubtful. He didn't want to bring it up, but he knew that Tony had to be wondering. They all were.

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for being patient waiting for this update. My spare time's been drained by some unfortunate things happening but I'll try and have the next update as soon as I can. :) Thanks for reading/comments/kudos, you're all wonderful.

## Chapter 45

*“Damn it, Tony.”* The voice was tired, spent. The line crackled as the Captain took a heavy breath.

“It’s fine,” Tony said glibly, trying to ignore the guilt sinking into the pit of his stomach. He upped the suit’s cooling systems, suddenly too hot.

“No,” Steve said.

“It’s fine,” Tony insisted. He knew that Steve was standing one block over, along with Natasha and Clint. The fight was done and Bruce would be back from the other guy at any minute. “Let’s roll out.” There was no reply on the line. “Autobots? Roll out? Come on, I know you’ve all seen that movie. We watched it together.” He smiled though no one could see him, forcing it to cover over how anxious he felt.

“Tony,” Steve said. He cringed. As far as Steve voices went, that was the worst of the worst. “We’ll discuss it back at the tower.”

“Alright, Mr. Steve.” Tony threw unnecessary force into the repulsors, propelling himself skyward. “I’ll bring my homework this time.”

“Are you sure that you want to say something to him?” Natasha muttered, covering her communication line.

“Yeah,” Steve said. As he watched Tony’s outline disappear into the sky he shut off his communicator. “He can’t keep taking risks like that, Nat. It endangers the whole team and him.” He let out a heavy sigh, tilting his head back. Clint disappeared to get a car.

“As far as Tony goes, that wasn’t the worst risk we’ve ever seen him take,” Natasha said. She crossed her arms and scanned the distance as if something was still out there.

“Not even close,” Steve agreed. “That’s the problem.” He set his shield against his back, shifting the weight on his feet. “Something’s going to happen to him, Nat, and I don’t want to be here when it does.”

Natasha’s lips parted for a moment but she closed them, considering the Captain’s face with tightly twisted lips instead. “It’s just...it’s his way of coping.”

“It’s not much of one,” Steve said gruffly. He tucked his hands into his pockets and looked around for Clint. There was a black unmarked vehicle in the distance. He hoped that it was the one.

“Maybe not,” Natasha said. “But it’s how he’s handling it.” She saw a red car turn the corner and knew it was Clint from the way it handled the curve.

“That’s gotta change,” Steve said. A red car came to a halt in front of them. Clint rolled down the window.

“He’ll be alright.” Natasha brushed her hand reassuringly against Steve’s shoulder as she got into the car. She grinned at Clint and swung herself into the front seat.

“Do you think we can fit the Hulk in this thing?” Clint asked.

“Don’t try doing that again,” Natasha said, reclining the seat. Clint looked in the rearview mirror

for a coconspirator in the Captain, but Steve was lost staring out the window.

“It’s not much fun anyway,” Clint said. “It’s like trying to get a stray dog to come.” Steve’s seatbelt clicked loudly from behind. Clint punched the gas and lurched the car out into New York City traffic.

Clint screwed around with the radio stations, listening to ten seconds of each until Natasha slammed her palm against the volume button. “I was just about to pick one,” Clint whined.

“Yeah. Right,” Natasha said. Clint pouted while stealing a glance in the rearview mirror. Steve’s fist was pressed against his face, prodding against his cheek when the car jostled his arm.

“Do you want me to stop off somewhere before you deal with our residential toddler?” Clint asked. “Maybe the bar?”

“No,” Steve said. He leaned off the window. “And you know the bar wouldn’t do me anything anyway.”

“Still. Wanna try?” Clint asked. Natasha glanced back in the rearview as well. They hit a pothole and the car shook, bumping them all in their seats.

“Not today,” Steve said. The car fell quiet.

Tony paced back and forth in his bedroom for the first fifteen minutes after he got back. It wouldn’t take them long to drive to the tower, he knew that. He ran through defenses in his head. He hadn’t been that close to the explosion. He had only fired shots that he knew he would make. No one got hurt, and that was their job, right?

It was difficult, because whether he wanted to admit it to himself or not, he knew in the back of his head that Steve was right. He had flown in too close to an explosion because he’d wanted the thrill. The perimeter had been sealed off, everything had been contained, there had been no need for him to be there.

Tony tugged off his sweaty shirt and dropped it on the floor. It had been a boring mission anyway. Contain a series of explosions. Capture suspected Hydra-affiliates. Other things Steve had listed but Tony hadn’t paid attention to.

“Sir, Mr. Rogers will either come to your floor or you can go to his.” Tony licked his lips. He glanced up at the ceiling, a learned habit. He decided to get a fresh shirt out.

“I’ll go to his,” Tony said. “So it’ll be easier to leave,” he muttered.

As Tony got into the elevator, he couldn’t get over how chastised Steve could make him feel. How did he do it? Tony needed to figure it out so that he could use it himself. He pulled his shirt taut, momentarily hiding the wrinkles. The moment he let go, the set in wrinkles returned.

Tony plastered on a grin and stepped into the Captain’s room with a cheerful, “you called?”

Steve hadn’t changed out of his uniform. He sat in a chair at his desk, facing out towards the room. Tony realized that he hadn’t been here in ages. There were photographs on the walls that he had never paid any attention to. “Take a seat,” Steve said, gesturing towards a leather armchair just as Tony recognized a picture of his father.

“Yeah,” Tony said, taking a wide step away from the wall. He threw himself into the armchair, lying his feet over the side. In spite of himself, his attention drifted back towards the portraits again. The young face of his father judged him from yellow faded print.

Steve combed his fingers back through his hair, recalling the words he’d rehearsed in the car. “You can’t take those kinds of risks anymore, Tony.” He meant it to sound softer than it did, but all patience had left. He was nothing but stern now.

Tony grinned like he didn’t really know what he was doing there. “It was no big deal, just a quick fly over—”

“Those excuses aren’t enough anymore, Tony.”

“I’m fine,” Tony said, dropping his feet back onto the floor in front of him. This reminded him of the conversations Steve had cornered him into a few months after Pepper’s affair. “I won’t do it again, best behavior, scout’s honor—”

“I can’t let you into the field when you pose a threat,” Steve said. “To yourself and everyone else.”

Tony shoved out a hard sigh and fidgeted in his chair. “This crap again? You’re not pulling me out of the field, Steve. I’m fine. Look at me. I started a second company. I have a regular sleep schedule for the first time in my life. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

Tony hated the way Steve’s jaw could set. He glared at the stubble instead of the captain’s flinty blue eyes. “You’ve been starting fights with Clint—”

“Fights is a strong word. How about we’ve had creative differences? That’s got a better ring to—”

“And you’re sulking over Loki.”

The edge Tony felt like he’d started to win dropped out from underneath his feet. The mention of Loki’s name knocked the wind right out of his sails. “I’m not,” Tony said, but he hardly heard himself. Since when did Steve have the gall to say something like that straight out?

“He’s important to you,” Steve said. He rolled his shoulders and let his gaze drift across the long shadows cast by the late afternoon sun. “I know, I was there.” He glanced at Tony but the engineer had guarded his expression. “I knew you’d help Loki but I didn’t know how far it would go.”

“Yeah, you’re just a hapless matchmaker,” Tony said. “Must be rough.”

Steve wasn’t deterred. “I don’t know if he’ll come back anymore than you do.” Fuck, how Tony hated that honest look Steve could pull. It was unfair. “He liked getting me to tell him stories about you,” Steve said with a tiny grin. “But he wasn’t meant to stay long term. If he comes back—”

“When,” Tony corrected him begrudgingly.

Steve hid his skepticism well. “I don’t want to have to tell him that we lost you.”

“There’s no need to be so dramatic right now, Captain America,” Tony said. “You’re not on stage.” Tony couldn’t quite manage to make it as playful as he wanted it to sound.

“Tony,” Steve said in his least favorite Steve voice again. “I have a responsibility to you and the team. I can’t let you go on like this. You’re taking risks you won’t always win.” He couldn’t shake the feeling that Tony was tumbling right back to where he started, and Steve couldn’t watch it happen again.

Tony scooted towards the edge of the chair. His pants clung to him where the backs of his knees were slicked with sweat. “Yeah, thanks for the pep talk, dad. I can—”

Steve’s knuckles flashed white against the chair but it was gone in an instant. “Tell me I’m wrong,” Steve cut him off. “Tell me I’m wrong and you’re not purposefully putting yourself at risk.”

“You’re wrong and I’m not purposefully putting myself at risk,” Tony parroted. He stood up.

“Fantastic,” Steve said sarcastically. He stood up to match Tony. The air seemed thinner, crackling with tension.

“Sir, Mr. Barnes has arrived,” said Jarvis. The neutral voice knocked them both out of the moment.

Tony took it as his cue to walk to the elevator doors. “We’re not finished with this conversation,” Steve said.

“You’ll have to send me the meeting notes on it then because I’m leaving,” Tony said. He stepped into the elevator and slammed the close button, desperate to avoid a run in with Bucky.

Any other time Steve would have chased after Tony, but Bucky showing up of his own accord was a fragile thing. Bucky hadn’t made the kind of recovery like Loki had.

In the lab Tony ranted to Jarvis, fruitlessly attempting to convince the A.I. that Steve was delusional. Jarvis countered with flatly read reports of Steve’s perfect psych evaluations (of course, Tony thought spitefully) until Tony gave up and muted him.

“Let go!” Jane snapped, batting Thor’s hand away. Her voice carried down the corridors for all of the palace to hear. “We’re going. We’re going to the Bifrost and that is it.” One of the warriors three cleared his throat and glanced at Thor. The blonde god had tried persuading Jane to move somewhere quieter, but she would not budge.

“Jane,” Thor tried.

“She has made her position clear,” Loki said. “Unless you wish to continue this public display of...” He smiled snidely. “Anti-affection?”

“You will leave Gungnir here,” Thor said.

“That was not a part of the agreement,” Loki said.

“Nor was it,” Thor said. Loki gripped the scepter a little closer. Sure, it was a prop now, but that didn’t mean he wanted to hand it over to Thor.

“Who cares about the stupid staff?” Jane demanded. Worked up, she spoke in loud, quick blurts of speech. Jane laughed hysterically for a moment. “You know, everyone was right. It was utterly stupid to fall in love with someone over the course of a weekend. I mean sure, guy at the center of my life’s work, but it’s not like we ever spent time together. The only time you invited me to meet your parents was *when I was dying*.”

“Jane,” Thor said carefully.

“Oh, and not to mention the whole vanishing for years at a time thing. I was so stupid! Darcy was

right! Can you believe that? I'm going to give her a raise when I get back, she's clearly a genius."

The guards that had responded clearly looked uncomfortable, caught in the middle of what was quite obviously a personal matter. Fandral cleared his throat until it was a hoarse bark. "Is something stuck in your throat?" Loki asked in mock sympathy. Fandral shot him a dark look.

"Take Gungnir," Thor told Fandral. "The All-father will need it when he returns to his rule."

Loki moved it just out of Fandral's reach, lording it above him. "You will do no such thing."

Jane didn't know what happened, but in the next moment, everything was chaos.

Fandral was knocked to the floor. Several guards fell at Loki's feet before he was subdued by sheer force of number and the burden of the staff. Thor stepped protectively in front of Jane and she shoved forward, claspng onto Loki's arm brace with a vice grip. It was torn from him as she was pulled backwards and he was tugged away. She waved the brace like a flimsy sword, pelting it against armored hands that grabbed her.

A blue light erupted out in a circle like a pulse. Jane stood in the epicenter, gasping for breath. The guard that had grabbed her laid crumpled at her feet.

She tossed the arm brace towards Loki, who had been knocked to the floor with everyone else in the tesseract's blast. He grabbed it and struggled to sit up.

Jane straightened her back, lifting her chin. "I've had enough," Jane said. For a moment she was stunning in full regal regalia, haloed in blue light. "I will not be told to change my mind. We have every right to leave and you will not stop us." She strode forward and bent down, helping Loki up from the floor. "Let's go," she said.

Loki saw the second line of guards round the corner behind her, but too late to do anything about the jettison of light that rocketed towards them. White enveloped them. A half-formed shield blocked him from the worst of the blast, but as he crumpled forward he saw Jane fall ashen faced beneath him.

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Jane rolled over. The motion was painful, but whatever was supporting her had a slight spring to it that eased the transition. A bolt of pain down her spine jolted her eyes open.

Her eyes darted across the room, sweat dropping down her forehead, until she saw familiarity. Loki was standing beside a table, reading something with his face turned from her. He was unaware that she had woken. Jane glanced around the room. It was tiny. Cramped. Sparsely decorated with furniture resembling that in Tony's tower.

"Where are we?" She wheezed out. "Are we home?"

Loki startled at her voice, but hearing the question, his expression dissolved into disappointment. "No," he said, taking the few steps over to her bedside.

The mortal had taken the brunt of the blast by a technology that had never been intended for her fragile kind. It was a relief to see her eyes open. For days he had relived the moment that she collapsed under him. He had dived forward and frantically searched her for the cube as he had also succumbed to the effects of the blast. Moments before going unconscious, he had brought them here.

Wherever here was. He assumed it was outside the realm of Asgard, for they had not been pursued. It had been the least of his worries. He and the mortal were badly injured. Once he had regained consciousness, he had hidden them inside of a cave. Between healing himself and keeping the mortal alive, progress had been slow. It had been several days before he was well enough to spare magic to make it resemble a dwelling. "Stay down," he told Jane.

The severity of his voice left Jane weak. She flopped back the few centimeters of progress that she'd made. Her gaze drifted towards the cube on the table, radiating blue light. She groaned.

"I can't dull your pain any further," Loki said. He sounded exhausted, defensive even.

"No," Jane said. She minutely nodded her head towards the table. "They'll come looking for that."

Loki followed her stare to the table. When he realized what she was looking at, he grinned. "It is not the first, nor the last time that it has been stolen. The cube belongs to no one." A few seconds paraded by before Loki noticed that Jane was smiling at him. He raised an eyebrow.

"No one, huh?" Jane asked. "Not even you?"

Loki scoffed. "I simply understand its nature now," he said. Jane hummed to disagree, but before Loki could say anything else she drifted back into unconsciousness.

The next time that Jane woke was several days later. By then, Loki had hidden the cube in the cave walls to spare himself the agony of temptation. His doorway back to Tony was wide open, but Jane was too fragile to make the journey. He did not want to face Tony without her.

Instead he paced the narrow room. Half of Gungnir had traveled with them. He didn't know what happened to the missing piece. Either it was on Asgard or lost among the cosmos. Perhaps he would give this half to Tony. The metal would fascinate the mortal.

If Tony was waiting for him. He had lost time on Asgard, and now here. It had been at least a few weeks. Perhaps Tony had moved on in that time. Perhaps he had felt abandoned and turned to someone else. Perhaps he had bored of Loki. Sometimes the thought filled Loki with seething rage. He dreamt of how he would bring Tony to his knees with fear and grief if the man had dared to betray him. At other times, he greeted the thought with nothing but a hollow despondency. He had no right to expect fortune.

"Are you okay?" Jane's voice echoed in the little space. Loki startled again this time. He painted on a neutral expression before turning to face her.

"I was not expecting you to wake," Loki said. It was not entirely convincing. By now she had woken more frequently, and her injuries were becoming fewer. As he recovered, so did his ability to heal her.

Jane shrugged. "How much closer are we?" She asked. Loki glanced at her and then walked to the bedside, but he already knew the answer to her health. He compulsively knew the answer. He checked incessantly, and this was only a show for her benefit. "Not good, huh?" Jane asked.

Loki's mouth flinched, but he did not answer. Jane sighed. "I want to get home, but you probably do even more than me." She tucked her hair back behind her ear, grimacing as the motion sent pain down throughout her shoulder. "What a mess."

Loki leaned his shoulder against the wall, crossing his arms. His eyes trailed towards the mouth of the cave, glamourised to look like a door. They heard the fall of heavy rain. "I guess I'm in your debt now," Jane said with a wry smile.



“This is entirely self-serving,” Loki said. He kept his gaze on the door, but studied her from the corner of his eye. Her expression didn’t change. “It will be to my benefit that Tony will be pleased by your return.”

“And yours,” Jane said lightly. She sat upright and dropped her hands beside her legs on the bed. Her fingers dug into the thin sheet of white linen. “If Darcy were here right now she’d probably be giving you an if any harm comes to him speech, but it’s just me so...” She sighed, her mouth caught up in a half smile. “I think that maybe we’re the lucky ones.”

Loki’s brow furrowed. The mortal tucked a fist beneath her chin, leaning her weight forward as her arm met her knee. A somber sort of peace descended on her face that he almost envied. “I just have to get better so we can get on with our lives.” She checked to see that the bag of books and materials she’d collected were still on the table. “It’s going to be good.”

Loki leaned off the wall and wandered towards the table. Thunder rumbled outside. “So you and magic now. Wait until Tony gets a load of that.” Loki didn’t brighten at that the way Jane expected him to. “I give him three weeks before he figures out the science behind it.” Loki snorted. “Seriously,” Jane said.

Loki cast a series of glowing runes out in front of him, orbiting the designs around like an etch a sketch. “Eight,” Loki said. “At minimum.”

“Five at the most,” Jane said. Loki glanced up at her, his hair falling over his shoulder, then went back to playing with the runes. “Uhhm,” Jane said hesitantly. “Let’s downplay what happened. Avenging is...sort of their thing, Tony included.”

“I have no intention of doing that,” Loki said assertively. “I will not lie on Asgard’s behalf.” He changed the colors of the runes to a bright red.

“But you said that the blast was just meant to stun everyone,” Jane said. “If they think it was an attack, they’ll get Shield involved or what’s left of it at least.”

“And?” Loki asked. “You should know that Asgard prides itself on the glory of warfare. Thor’s kindness only persists because he has the strength to smite anyone who challenges him. It is not a common trait on Asgard, nor a beneficial one.” He tossed the runes with force, morphing them to shades of red and blue. “I do not think I need to reiterate to you how Asgard values your kind.”

“You were an exception,” Loki muttered, more to himself. “Thor’s infatuation with you allowed you more reign than you realized.” Jane followed the trail of glowing symbols cast around his fingers. “Without my mother to persuade him otherwise, Odin will be without mercy. Thor’s sympathies will not be coddled.”

Jane wasn’t entirely sure that she believed Loki, but she wasn’t about to contradict him. “Do you think that you’ll see Thor again?” Jane asked quietly.

“Yes,” Loki said. “It is inevitable.” The purple light cast in the runes caught against his eyes, giving them an eerie illumination. “It would not surprise me if he returned to win your sympathy when the chance arises.”

“He’s not malicious,” Jane said.

“Be careful with your sympathies,” Loki warned.

“Sympathy for you wouldn’t be recommended either,” Jane countered him. “But here we are.”

“Which merely demonstrates your intelligence,” Loki replied.

Jane rolled her eyes. “I can’t wait until Tony’s there to back sass you.” She laughed, just enough that it didn’t send pain through her ribcage. “He’s lucky to have you to keep him on his toes.” She paused, and then a bit more thoughtfully said, “there aren’t a lot of people that challenge him or call Tony out. He comes from wealth and they want to be on his good side.”

“I’m aware,” Loki said, clipped. Tony ran through all of his spare thoughts in the long, quiet hours in the cave. Talking of the man aloud did nothing to soothe him.

“He needs you,” Jane said. “You don’t realize it, but he does.” She curled her fingers in the linen, staring at Loki.

Loki pushed his hair back over his shoulder and then resumed the runes, acting indifferent. “I thought this was your if any harm comes to him speech.”

“You’ll get enough of that, I’m sure,” Jane said. She knew the sacrifice he was making by standing watch over her. As much as she despised how utterly powerless it made her feel yet again, it also endeared Loki to her. She had not forgotten how dangerous Loki could be, how many transgressions he’d committed, but she still wanted to thank him somehow. “How about this is the I’m glad you two have each other and I’m a little jealous speech?”

Loki flashed a crude grin, about to say something salacious simply to toy with her, and she rushed to stop him. “Don’t,” Jane said with a scowl. She flopped back against the bed. “On second thought, I’m dreading you two together. I can’t deal with double this.”

“Ms. Foster, you will ruin our fun.”

“Good.”

Loki laughed at her being indignant. She sat back up in the bed, glaring at him, but it only made him laugh harder. “If you’re going to have a laugh,” Jane said, “you might as well make me laugh.” He stopped and stared at her like he had no idea what she was referring to. “Do Steve again,” she said.

A devious smirk crawled across Loki’s face. By far, his impression of Steve was his favorite. He indulged Jane, incapable of turning down an audience and soaking in the attention. It kept his mind distracted, and Jane’s. The entire situation was a strange crossroads to be at, and both desperately needed a distraction from their thoughts. When he had made it through all of their mutual acquaintances, he stopped. Jane grinned at him, clearly exhausted but unwilling to let sleep take her. “I can’t wait until we’re back,” she said softly.

“When you can withstand the tesseract’s effects, we will go.” He promised.

“How soon is that?”

“Soon,” he said.

## Chapter 46

“Clearly I’m right,” Tony said, gesturing to the single remaining slice of cheese pizza in the box. “It’s literally called Best Pizza.”

“That’s just a name,” Clint said. It was true, he had eaten half of Tony’s pizza, but he wasn’t about to give in. “Totonno’s is better.” He stole a pizza box from where Tony was sprawled out on the couch beside Bruce. The setting sun caught in his eyes from the balcony windows as he looked over to the other couch. “Let’s ask the judge.”

Steve groaned. He couldn’t eat another slice, and he couldn’t tell if Clint and Tony were being entirely playful in their pizza competition, but it was better than them outright bickering. “You know I’m always up for a trip to Brooklyn,” he said. “Even when it’s just for pizza.”

“That’s not an answer,” Clint said.

“We need an answer, Rogers,” Tony said.

“Then you’re both wrong,” Steve said.

Clint and Tony immediately ignored him, turning their attention on Natasha instead. She grabbed another slice and threw her legs over the side of the couch. “Steve would know,” she said.

“Come on Nat,” Clint said. She hummed, biting into the slice and not bothering to look at him. Tony was just about to counter with something, but he felt an unmistakable vibration against his chest.

“Tony?” Bruce asked. Tony had leapt up. Tony’s face was still, alert. His shoulders set back and his body went stiff.

“I forgot something in the lab,” Tony said. He heard them call after him as he rushed towards the elevator, but he didn’t understand the words in his focus. The pendant pulsed again, whirring against his chest where the reactor had once been. The sensation sent a chill down his spine.

As soon as the doors closed, Tony yanked the pendant out from beneath his shirt and over his head. A green teal glow illuminated from the center, casting light on his tanned hand. Tony breathed heavily. The pendant shook again.

When the doors opened it was to the lobby, and Tony stepped out without looking up from his hand. A thin light appeared, leading somewhere like a string tied in the distance. He picked up his feet and jogged out the sliding glass doors and onto the street.

The chill night air hit his face. For a moment he recognized the street outside, but forgot it the second he looked back at the pendant. This had never occurred before. He could not shake the feeling that it was finally leading him towards something.

He ran down the street, barely noticing the pedestrians he sprinted past, his feet falling heavily on the pavement. Cold air seared into his strained lungs as he passed beneath a street lamp. There were cars speeding by, noisy groups of people enjoying a Friday night, and the startled shout of a drunk recognizing the Tony Stark, but he noticed none of it.

It was unbearable to question if the pendant was truly leading him towards anything, because the hope was overwhelming. *Please let it be what I think it is*, Tony thought. *Please be right, please be*

*right, please be right.*

The light vanished down an alleyway. Tony followed it past overflowing dumpsters and squealing mice, barely missing a collision with a door that was thrown open at the back of a bar. He clenched the pendant between his fingers. It vibrated faster. He was terrified of dropping it and losing the light.

*You made me wait, you bastard, don't do this to me again,* Tony thought as he rounded the corner. He could see nothing but street lamps in the distance. Stopping to catch his breath, Tony let his back fall against a brick wall.

Sweat slid down his forehead. As if it was impatient and displeased, the pendant rattled and pulsed so hard that he rushed to catch it with both hands. Tony's hands trembled as he fumbled for the chain and slipped it back over his neck.

The green teal light skewed his vision. Tony took one long, hard breath and pushed himself up off the wall. The excitement made him dizzy. Heart pounding, he followed the light, cold air sweeping through his hair.

"I told you how to calibrate it," a voice said.

"You use it one time and think yourself an expert," another voice said.

"I'm sorry, whose wrong calibration is this?"

Loki's face set into sullen resignation, hardly concealing his annoyance. Jane, struggling to stand upright, was nonetheless insistent. Jane coughed hard and caught herself against the half of Gungnir that she was using as a walking stick. "Come on," Jane prodded him playfully. "Just admit that I know how to calibrate it."

"You try my patience," Loki said, pacing haughtily past her. He kept his head held high as he walked in front.

"Wrong way," Jane said. Loki stopped beneath a street sign. He glared up at it, as if it was lying to him. "The tower is south, that's north."

Loki's mouth flinched. Intuitively, he felt as though he should go down the street before them, but magic could only give him a general sense of direction. Jane lived here and knew where to go. "If you walk any slower I shall have to carry you," he said.

Jane held onto Gungnir as if she stood a chance at fighting him for it. He had only given it to her under the pretense that waiting on her hobbling along was loathsome. "I am perfectly capable," she said.

"Is that why you're so slow?" He smirked, walking back and past her. His cape hit her ankles.

"If you'd let me calibrate it, I wouldn't have to walk!" Jane said, her face flushing. She hurried to catch up but in her haste caught the golden staff on a crack in the pavement. It fell with a loud clatter.

"You burdensome—" Loki began, turning back around. Jane saw his face go still as she crouched down to pick up Gungnir. He was watching something in the distance attentively. She stood up carefully.

There was a figure watching them in the distance.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but then she recognized who it was. His chest heaving, Tony stood frozen to the spot. His warm features were held together by the slimmest of willpower, caught between crushing relief, disbelief, and joy. A tremor struck his bottom lip.

As if enchanted, Tony's feet began to move. It felt like seconds to him before he was standing in front of Loki.

Loki saw the mortal sprint towards him and felt a twisted palpitation in his heart. Tony came to him in agonizing slow motion, and he couldn't let himself feel anything until he knew for sure. His body writhed in recognition as his mind held him steady, fixated on the sluggish steps Tony made, the peculiar look on the man's face, contorted by the glow coming from his neck and the flashes of street lamps above.

The instant that Tony was within reach he shoved his hands in past Loki's stiff arms and waist to squeeze his arms around Loki's back. "Don't you ever do that again," Tony said breathlessly. He pressed his nose to Loki's chest and breathed in as deeply as his lungs would allow. It was everything he remembered, but better. "You took way too fucking long to get back," Tony said. He squeezed hard. "Never again," he muttered.

Tony felt Loki's rigid muscles loosen, and then all of his weight melted into Tony at once. He looked up just in time to see Loki staring down at him, his eyes especially lucid. There was an intensity there that Tony couldn't quite name but didn't care to. He reached up and grabbed the back of Loki's head, bending the god down to his reach.

Loki took the mortal's mouth before the man had the chance, sliding his tongue past swollen lips as the man's fingers flexed against his scalp and tangled into his hair. Tony moaned like it was the first time, and Loki's limp hands suddenly sprung to life. He slid his hands down the man's back, fingers dipping against the thin, warm fabric for each vertebrae as if to make sure that they were still where he remembered.

"Eh-hem," Jane coughed out. She slumped against Gungnir. **"Eh-hem-hrrm-hmm."**

Reluctantly their mouths parted, but they made no move to separate. "I'd happily leave, but as someone pointed out earlier, I'm rather incapable of moving on my own at the moment." Jane placed her free hand against her hip, staring at them in a way that tottered between amused and annoyed.

Tony's hands absently slid to the small of Loki's back as he stared intently at Jane. She looked sick, with bags beneath her eyes and a fragile leanness to her body. He observed it but didn't really think on it. Instead, he stepped over and pulled her into a firm hug, his arm pressing her shoulders against him. Jane bit back a yelp. "Thank you," he muttered against her ear as he leaned back and let go. Jane glanced at him, uncertain, then broke into a coughing fit. She waved off their weary looks, standing upright.

"Let's just get back," she wheezed, wiping a tear out of her eye. "I don't want to be around you two in fifteen minutes."

"Ms. Foster," Loki said, catching Tony around the waist and drawing him back in. "Are you quite certain you don't want to stick around and watch?" He felt Tony jump and laughed, a low chuckle deep in his chest. He rested his chin against Tony's shoulder, smirking at her.

"You're disgusting," Jane said.

"Ah-well," Loki said. He straightened up just enough that his lips were beside Tony's ear. "Her

health is delicate,” he whispered. Tony was so caught up in the moment that her earlier statement didn't dawn on him until now. He turned to Loki for clarification but the god spoke in his full voice deliberately. “Shall we return then?”

“The sooner the better,” Jane said flatly.

There was a thrilled spark in Tony's eyes as he let go of Loki. The god caught it a moment too late. In the distance there was a rumble, and no one had to guess what it was. “We could take a cab,” Jane said as the first suit arm latched onto Tony. “You have a wallet.”

“The showmanship is quite unnecessary, Stark,” Loki said, crossing his arms. Inwardly he was pleased, but he'd be damned if he let Tony know.

The faceplate of the Iron Man suit arrived and Tony's smug face vanished beneath it. He pretended to be incapable of hearing their arguments while it assembled around him.

“We can take a car!” Jane insisted as the last piece set into place. “Tony, think this through, you're not—” The words were lost as his arm came around her and she scrambled to hold onto Gungnir, for no reason other than that she did not want to hear Loki gripe about her losing it.

Tony's free arm caught Loki, and knowing the god's reflexes as he did, Tony was entirely certain that Loki's capture was deliberate. Loki fought to keep his long hair out of his face as the pavements shrunk below them. “Thank you for selecting the most inconvenient method possible,” Loki shouted over the wind. Tony kicked more power into the thrusters.

Jane was clinging to the suit for dear life, squeezing her eyes shut and then daring to look down only to close them again. Loki smirked. “I thought you liked flying through the sky via questionable transportation,” Loki yelled over at her. Jane glared at him for the few seconds her eyes opened. “What? You fly only by hammer?”

“This is stupid!” Jane yelled. Loki's laughter was lost in the wind.

“No more than a flying hammer,” he muttered, relaxing against the suit.

Tony was fucking thrilled. He would've taken the longest possible route back just to enjoy it if he hadn't wanted to get back to the tower so badly. He could hear Loki and Jane complaining, but he couldn't have cared less. They were fine. He landed them on the tower balcony somewhat reluctantly.

“That was entirely unnecessary,” Loki said, slicking his hair back to perfection with a flash of green. Jane combed the hair from her face with her fingers. It stayed wild.

“You own a car!” Jane exclaimed. Tony's armor was dismantling, but he still pretended that he could not hear. “Several! Probably more than most people have in their entire lives!”

“Norns forbid you pass up the opportunity to parade your suit,” Loki said. Tony's armor was entirely gone, but he still acted like the face plate was up. Loki glanced at one of the patio chairs and then sat down, stretching out. He was wrecked by the journey but unwilling to show it. Jane sank onto a chair and stuck Gungnir in front of Loki to take without a word.

Inside, the Avengers were watching Tony animatedly gesturing towards Loki and Jane. They were answering him, their mouths moving soundlessly behind the glass. Loki appeared amused, Jane adamant. The lightness on Tony's face was almost painful to witness.

Clint took a wallet from his back pocket. He dug out a wad of bills and dumped them in Bruce's outstretched hand. Then he turned and disappeared to his floor.

"Should we stick around?" Natasha asked.

Tony's soundless lips pulled back in a laugh. "No," Steve said as he stared out the window. "We don't have to catch up with them tonight."

"Let them have some time together," Bruce said, walking towards the elevator. They all stepped inside and moved down to a common room floor instead.

"I'm keeping it," Jane said. "I'm the most responsible one here."

"I have a far deeper understanding of it," Loki said.

"Really?" Jane asked sarcastically. Her moment was stolen by a fit of coughing. She fell forward, and in a split instant, Loki caught her shoulder and uprighted her. His hand snapped back to his side. They continued talking like nothing had happened, but Tony studied them as he played along. They were exhausted, with dark circles set beneath their eyes and pallid skin. Loki was unwell, but that was not new to Tony. It was Jane that concerned him. Loki's uncharacteristic gesture made him think it was serious.

There would be time later. As much as he wanted to be with them, they needed rest. He didn't feel right keeping them, and he'd be lying if he didn't admit that he also wanted Loki to himself.

"Alright kids. Time for bed," Tony announced. "Jane, you're staying on the guest floor. No wild parties unless I'm invited. Let's go." He walked to the door and held it open expectantly.

Loki was at his side immediately. Jane sighed as she got up, reluctant to leave the chair.

They were quiet as they walked across the dimly lit seating area to the elevator. They squinted in the harsh light as the doors rolled open. Tony gently pushed the buttons for a guest floor and his own.

The ride was swift and silent. Jane stood a few feet from them, as if she remembered their earlier threat, but she was so haggard and spent that she just sort of slumped against the side.

"Thanks," Jane said when the door opened. Tony shrugged like it was nothing, leaning against the back of the elevator. Loki stood with arms crossed beside him. They watched her attentively as the doors closed in front of them. Jane stood alone in the darkness. She contentedly wandered towards the bed and flopped onto the mattress with a pleased sigh. She fell asleep even before she found the pillow, marveling at the contrast between this bed and hers on Asgard.

Loki's stare lingered on the closed doors as they rose. "Tell me what happened," Tony said. Loki uncrossed his arms and leaned off the elevator wall.

Tony opened his arms and pulled Loki towards him. His eyes stayed tense and expectant. Loki let out a tightly held breath before he allowed Tony to pull him in. Firm hands slid past his waist to keep him there. "She could not fully withstand the blast that we were struck by," Loki answered, sharp eyes wandering back to Tony only when he had finished speaking. He wanted to witness the man's reaction.

Tony's arms around his back tightened and brought him closer. "What kind of blast are we talking about?"

A tiny, wry grin tugged at the corner of Loki's mouth before vanishing. "She challenged Thor before an audience of guardsmen." Loki drummed his fingertips against Tony's shoulder. "The blast was meant to stun and restore order. She is lucky to have survived that and the tesseract's journey at all the first time. We were forced to wait to recover...Asgard and I are not on agreeable terms. They are not to pursue me, and if they arrive here—"

"We'll take care of it," Tony cut him off, reacting to the anxiety in his voice. He sighed and dropped his head back against the wall. "How bad is she?"

"She'll recover," Loki said. "It may take a few weeks yet. My healing ability wanes when I am unwell."

Tony kneaded his fingers against Loki's back. "How are you?" Tony asked. Loki ran his hands down Tony's shoulders as the elevator chimed open. For a moment his eyes burrowed deep into Tony with an expression he couldn't read. Tony stood anchored to the spot, caught inside the slender ring of green seizing him. Loki took a backwards step towards the room. Tony kept no more distance than they needed to walk.

Loki collapsed against the bed, gleefully calling forth his magic for the first time in the tower. His magic disrobed him completely and left him grinning with closed eyes against the pillow. His dark hair fanned out in disheveled angles around him as he took in a deep breath and drew in the familiar scent, each nerve in his body uncoiling in relief. Every last bit of him was sinking down into the sheets he'd been certain that he would never feel again.

With a bare god stretching in his bed, blissed out as he flexed his fingers into the sheets he was twisting himself into, it was all Tony could do to stand still. The worst of it was that Loki wasn't even toying with him. Loki had blatantly disregarded everything but contentment. Tony swore under his breath at the oblivious bastard. A thin, incredulous smile crept across his face. Tony was glad he was back.

Loki heard Tony utter something beneath his breath. The mattress sank beneath Tony's advancement. He crawled into Loki's arms. "God," Tony whispered to himself. His lips met the crook of Loki's neck with reverence. "You're a piece of work."

"Am I?" Loki asked.

"Yes," Tony said dully. "And a pain in the ass." Loki chuckled.

"A good one," Loki said.

Tony's mouth cracked open and then slid up into a grin. "I'm supposed to say that." Loki hummed a disagreeing note, staring at Tony, daring him to take the challenge. "We'll have to settle it by competition then."

"I would not want to kill your ego," Loki said. His eyes fell closed in a heavy blink.

"That's impossible," Tony assured him.

Loki's fingers snuck into his hair, and the moment his lips parted and Tony felt that reckless tongue slide across his teeth he laughed. It was as graceless and self-willed as he remembered. He grinned, giddily almost, staring back down at Loki. The god did not open his tired eyes to question Tony's laughter or the eager kiss that followed.



Loki's arms fell like dead weight against Tony's back. Now that he was finally safe, exhaustion claimed him with a vengeance.

Tony kept opening his eyes and checking, like Loki would suddenly disappear, and each time he could not believe his luck. Loki returned the advances of his eager lips, but it wasn't enough. "You're killing me," Tony murmured, nipping at his neck.

Loki's arms flopped on the bed beside him, like Loki thought that the weight was crushing him. Tony lowered his forehead against Loki's chest and laughed. "Not literally," Tony said. "But maybe if we keep this up."

He felt Loki's hand slide back along his scalp and sighed. He knew how difficult the journey had been. Loki was here. His wanting to could wait, so long as Loki stayed here.

"You'd better sleep tonight," Tony said teasingly, pressing his lips to the corner of Loki's sleepy mouth. "I'm not going to give you a rest tomorrow." Loki's mouth parted into a languid grin. Tony slid off to his side and pulled the god in against him. His arm locked around Loki with the unspoken promise to not let go. He kissed the exposed skin at the back of Loki's neck and felt the faintest shiver in response.

Loki felt Tony's warm breath pass over his neck, the man's warmth seeping into his weary body. Loki was half asleep already, but with his legs intertwined in Tony's and the man's arm wrapped possessively around him, he could feel no greater satisfaction.

## Chapter 47

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony couldn't sleep. He had drifted off at some point, but his incessant mind had woken him up shortly after. Something wasn't right with Loki, Jane, and Asgard. Sure, Tony wasn't happy with Thor for the way that Loki had been left at the tower, but he didn't see Thor as a villain either. Thor had sided with them to put down Loki's invasion. Thor had never let them say an ill word about his brother in the tower, and he'd certainly defended Loki against the Avenger's condemnations before this. Hell, he carried around fucking Mjolnir like it was a tennis ball.

Tony couldn't reconcile it. Thor never would have allowed Jane or Loki to be hurt like that. Not on purpose.

Tony realized that he'd been holding onto Loki too tightly and released some of the pressure from his arm. He didn't know what he was supposed to do if Thor came back, or what he was supposed to tell the team now. He knew what he was going to tell them. He knew damn well what that was. Loki was off house arrest and Tony would move Loki and himself to another tower if the Avengers were going to make an issue out of it.

He had already drawn up plans on a new research facility with a residential building. He could easily move his lab there. The new business would be headquartered there. He could offer Loki a house or castle or whatever it was that the god wanted. Maybe a moat?

Tony realized that he'd put pressure back into his arm and let it go. Though he'd hidden them, Tony'd had doubts that Loki would return. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but Tony could still recall vividly the day that Loki had been with Jane in the security room. It was hard to forget the face that had so emphatically told her that mortals were nothing but a weekend trip to him, a heartbeat.

Then there were practical things too. Loki could've been working sympathy out of Tony to use him as a shield against Asgard. No, Tony thought, Loki's performance had been too raw and unscripted to be that manipulative. Tony was certain of that.

Still, as the weeks had crawled by, Tony had to pay some thought to the voices in his head. They were happy to point out how he always lost the people closest to him. That he should never trust anyone, that his actions had made the affair happen, that his legacy was nothing but a playboy billionaire that couldn't keep it together. "Stark," a muffled voice said. Tony hummed in acknowledgment.

Loki lifted his head up from the hot, stuffy pillow. Agitation swept through him. "If you are impersonating a constrictor, consider me impressed." He wedged a hand up between himself and Tony's arm and pushed. "But I have zero intention of being your prey."

Tony released the pressure in his arm immediately. Loki huffed and dropped his head back into the pillow, squeezing his eyes shut. He was just about to drift off again when he felt an arm curl back over him.

Loki's eyes opened, wide and impatient. Tony's arm burned like fire against his feverish skin. "Stark," Loki warned. He leaned his chest up off the bed and scooted over to the icy sheets beside him.

When he felt Tony sit up in the bed he knew that something was wrong. Loki rolled over onto his back. He could hardly make out Tony's hunched outline in the dark room.

Tony heard Loki take a long, deep breath. The room was pitch black except for a dim beacon from an electronic device shoved on a desk in the corner. Tony combed his fingers through his hair.

He felt Loki's fingers graze against his waist, imploring him to return to sleep. "You've got to tell me," Tony said.

Loki dropped his hand onto the bed. "What," he said. His voice fell flat and expressionless in the dark.

"What the hell happened," Tony said. He sounded exhausted and old suddenly. "What happened to you, and why Thor dropped you off, and why the hell you two—" Loki's hand had found its way back into his side and flexed against him, causing him to involuntarily flinch into it.

"I claimed the throne of Asgard," Loki said. "And was mutinied against. Is there much else to say?" He asked joylessly, staring listlessly at a ceiling he could not see.

"What did you forget, though?" Tony asked. He twisted back around towards Loki and moved his legs to be more comfortable. "Why'd you show up here the way you did?"

There was nothing but Loki's breath breaking silence. "I am certain that Thor saw it as a kindness," Loki said. Without sight, Tony couldn't read Loki's face. "I was safe here when I, by Asgardian law, should have been executed." Tony's hand blindly fumbled against Loki before the man crawled over him. He didn't care this time.

He spoke in a weary voice. "I didn't kill the All-father," Loki said. He knew that Tony had suspected it. He had suspected himself. "I made him into a frost giant and banished him to Jotunheim to rot."

Tony took that in for a minute. "Remind me to never piss you off."

"I don't think you need reminding," Loki said fondly. He listened to Tony's uneasy breathing as he drummed his fingertips against the small of Tony's back. "I impersonated the All-father," Loki said. He slowly began to unwind the story, impressed at first with how remarkably quiet Tony could be when he wanted to know something. There was no nervous joking, or snark. If Tony hadn't kept shifting against him when he heard something he didn't like, Loki would've thought that Tony had fallen asleep.

It wasn't until Loki got to telling him about Thor's reaction to them that Tony said something. "You weren't though," Tony said. He was so quiet that Loki had to ask him to repeat himself.

"I wasn't what?" Loki asked, coming off as oddly curious.

"You weren't playing games with me," Tony said.

If Loki's heart could have stilled right then it would have. "No," he said, flashing back to the day he'd fretted over his wardrobe closet all because he cared what a mortal thought of him. If anything, Tony had been unwittingly playing a game on him. "You...you could not have thought..."

A warm sigh passed between Tony's lips. "No, but god of mischief and all that," Tony said, sounding guarded. Loki's knees bent up off the bed, trapping him with legs on either side.

“Say it,” Loki said. He heard Tony make a little scoffing sound. “I know you conceal something from me.” His voice lilted on dangerous or paranoid.

“I can’t even see your face,” Tony said. “How would you know—” Loki’s hand squeezed anxiously against his side. There was a broken rasp in his breathing. “Before this all started,” Tony said. “You said mortals were just a weekend trip to you.” Tony rubbed his hand over his face, brushing against his stubble. “Don’t get on my case for believing you.”

Loki’s legs slowly slid back down flat to the bed.

Loki thought of running, of hiding before he met rejection. “Just tell me that’s not true,” Tony said. “Tell me that you changed your mind.” It was a demand, not a suggestion. Loki’s thoughts of running ceased.

He hooked his thumb against Tony’s waist, stroking it back and forth. “I may have said things to wound Ms. Foster when I was first imprisoned here,” Loki said. “I was wrong.”

Tony relaxed immediately, tension collapsing in him. “You could not have thought,” Loki said, “that I would allow myself to be used so carelessly?” He felt Tony’s face at the crook of his neck. “Tony Stark, I mean to keep you. I have no intention of casting you aside so carelessly.”

Tony’s chin propped up against his chest. “Yeah, well, Natasha says I have trust issues out the ass.” He chuckled half-heartedly. “I’m pretty sure she stuck it in my file if you don’t believe me.”

“Don’t,” Loki said. The expression in his tone grasped Tony’s attention immediately. “Don’t ever think of me as one that would wantonly abandon those he cared for.” The severe edge in his voice sounded too loud and demanding in the dark bedroom. “I am not one of them.”

“Jarvis, can you record that for me?” Tony muttered just quietly enough for Loki to make out. Loki knew things with Tony had gone too far to be denied. The poison already called his veins home.

“I will not profess love trivially, nor will I allow it to be said to me pointlessly,” Loki said. His family had showed him the error of a careless heart, and that was a lesson he did not need repeated. “If you do not mean to keep your promises to me, we go no further.”

“Oh, I mean to,” Tony said. “God, do I mean to.” He shifted his chest and felt those hands at his back adjust with him. “So...you were at the part with Thor tearing into you. You’ve got to tell me what happened next, because right now I really want to punch him in the face.”

Loki chuckled. “Only I get to,” he said in a whisper.

Loki replayed the conversation he’d had with Thor about Midgard, and quieted Tony when he worked himself up again. It was strange to Loki. He had never intended to tell Tony any of it, and yet it came easily.

He told Tony of his conspiring with Jane, and the return trip to Jotunheim. He glossed over the weeks spent recovering, preferring not to remember them himself. The long, quiet hours had been torture enough.

When he’d finished recounting everything, he traced minute circles into the cotton shirt on Tony’s back. “I don’t know about you,” Tony’s voice said in the dark. “But I could really use a drink right now.”

“Are you getting cute with me?” Loki prodded him.

“No,” Tony promised. He sat up, Loki’s hands catching his hips. “Really. Let’s get out of here. What do you think? There’s a rooftop bar around here. It’s a hole in the wall and the food’s shit, but it’s open all night long and we can probably pay off the two or three people that’ll be there to keep their mouths shut.”

Loki slid a hand back against his smooth hair, considering. “There’s no need to pay them off,” Loki said.

“Trust me, I thought the tabloids would be fun to fuck with too, but it just ends up wearing you out.”

A flash of green light sparked in front of Tony’s face. Loki held it in place, smugly watching the delight and intrigue that swept across the man’s face. “You can study how this works later,” Loki said. Tony’s hand pressed to the pendant buzzing against his chest. “No one will recognize us unless I wish them to.”

The light faded, returning the room to darkness. “Okay,” Tony said, enthusiasm perking up in his tired voice. He called on Jarvis to light the room, and as he pulled on a pair of pants he saw Loki find a set of his own clothes in a dresser drawer. He wisely made no comment on finding half of his things tucked away in alongside Tony’s.

They walked. It was fucking weird to walk by both their standards, but it worked. The city was as noisy and smoggy as ever, but with a clear sky above and rows of city lights ahead, it wasn’t unpleasant in the least.

The bar was little more than some tables and a counter with a laid-back bar tender. Eighties music played low on the speakers, and string lights had been twirled around the pergola stretching out above them. There was a pair of off duty paramedics playing cards at one of the tables, but other than that the place was empty.

Tony dragged a steel chair over to the furthest table. Loki was already sitting there with his feet propped up against the balcony ledge. “The beer’s a little shitty too,” Tony said, setting an open bottle beside Loki.

Loki took it without a word and pulled a slow sip. Tony stared, swearing that Loki was drinking it that way on purpose, but he knew he was wrong. He took a heavy gulp and set his bottle down. He leaned back into the chair. There was a cold breeze blowing, but nothing miserable.

“The research facility’s going to go over there,” Tony said. He pointed to a place on the horizon.

“The offices will be there,” Loki said, pointing at a place arbitrarily. A slow grin crept onto Tony’s face.

“The offices will be there,” Tony agreed. They settled into an easy silence. Sunrise was dawning when they finally decided to go back. Tony crawled into bed with Loki behind him and fell asleep as his head hit the pillow.

Tony woke with cold toes pressed into his calf. He delicately untangled himself from the arms that had curled around him, perhaps to keep him from constricting Loki to death. Numb beyond feeling, Tony winced as the arm he’d slept on slowly returned to life with pricking pins and needles.

Loki’s face flinched in a dream. Tony knew better than to wake him, perfectly assured that no matter how pleasant Loki found him, the god would not hesitate to punish him for an early start by

tossing him out the window. Tony was rather fond of the window in his bedroom, so he decided to tiptoe into the bathroom instead.

As he stepped out of the shower and brushed his hair he decided that he would follow their old routine. Breakfast in bed, cancel all of his plans for the day, the like. Hell, it wasn't even breakfast now. It was what, lunch? "Sir," Jarvis asked. Tony spat out toothpaste.

"What's up, Jarv?"

"I thought you may want to know that Ms. Foster is using your lab." Tony dropped his toothbrush with a clatter.

"You just let her in there?"

"She is quite persuasive."

Tony pushed out a loud sigh and started for the door.

He stopped in place. Loki was perched on the edge of the bed, fully dressed and alert. Magic, Tony thought. Or, he suggested to himself, Loki could dress himself. No, magic, he dressed by magic, right? Well, not last night— "Are you going to gape all day?" Loki asked with a smirk, standing.

"There's been a break in to the lab," Tony said. He started back towards the elevator.

"Ms. Foster," Loki suggested, joining him. He chuckled at the look on Tony's face. "I only have time for one insistent Midgardian today," Loki said, edging Tony into the corner of the elevator.

Tony grinned hopefully. "Hold that thought," he said, snaking his arm around to send them to the lab. "Because there's really expensive equipment in there, and Dum-E gets nervous when he meets new people. He kind of has to warm up to them." He smiled placatingly as Loki all but pouted, turning his face haughtily to the side. "Just five minutes, promise."

The doors opened before the conversation could go further. Tony stepped out into his lab in a hurry, too late to realize or block Selvig and Loki from seeing one another. "Shit," Tony said.

Jane was the first to react, hopping up from the desk she'd been sitting on and spilling coffee onto her shirt. "We were just taking a look at a few things."

A scowl appeared on Loki's face the instant that he looked at Selvig. The scientist inched a little closer to Jane, and Tony had to rip the pendant from his neck to keep it from swiveling clear off. "Alright," Tony said. "I was hoping that we could save this for freshman orientation, but Loki, Selvig's working for me, and actually now that you're both here you can go ahead and extract your magic."

Loki tore his attention from Selvig. "Extract?"

"Yeah," Tony said, holding the pendant up. "I couldn't quite work out how to extract it yet, not because I can't, I just haven't had the research

time—"

"That's alright Tony," Selvig said. He turned his back towards a screen, as if he was pretending that Loki wasn't there. Jane stopped blotting the spot on her shirt and looked up at him.

"Extract magic?" She asked.

“Loki’s magic has been causing chaos in Selvig ever since it got trapped there. Same with Clint, but not in the same way.”

Tony walked up to Selvig and held out the pendant. It twirled in anxious loops on the chain.

“That’s what this indicates,” Tony told her. “Jarv, project the readings. Look,” Tony said, pulling up a spot on the chart. “It’s there, I just have no idea how to extract it.”

“But where did you get this?” Jane asked, taking the pendant from his hand. She held it to the light, inspecting it closely.

“Loki,” Tony said, glancing back at him. Loki was still in the doorway, watching them with a masked expression. “It was a project to keep me busy, right?” Tony called over to him. “I would’ve finished it if I’d had more time.”

Loki fought at the smirk tugging on his lips. Oh, his clever mortal. That had not been the plan, not at all. The pendant had been an insurance to find Tony, and Tony had found a way to use it for something else. “Oh?” Loki asked. “I’d expected you to finish it before I returned,” he said, striding towards Tony. “I have to admit, I’m a bit disappointed.” Playful amusement snuck along his features.

“Next time,” Tony assured him with pride.

“I’ll devise other projects for you,” Loki said, taking the pendant. Its pulse abated in his palm. He had been entirely unaware of a magical residue in Selvig, or Clint. He decided that it could have been a side effect of the Tesseract’s influence and pushed the thought aside. “I can extract it,” Loki said, speaking with his eyes on the pendant.

Tony and Jane turned to look at Selvig. He shrugged, looking at Loki. The god polished the gem with his thumb, listening only. “What will the side effects be? They can’t be worse than this,” Selvig said.

“You may notice some senses dull,” Loki said. “But that will only be them returning to their natural state.”

“Great,” Selvig said.

Loki tucked the gem into his pocket. He turned to the scientist that had foiled him, wrestling with the disdain that naturally caused. “This may hurt,” he said, reaching out his hand.

Blue sparks jumped up his hand an instant later. A light in Selvig’s eyes faded until its unusual sheen was replaced by something natural and corporeal. He cleared his throat. Loki lifted his hand, inspecting his fingertips.

He slipped the pendant back into Tony’s pocket so subtly that not even Tony noticed. “How do you feel?” Jane asked.

Selvig flexed his lips, thinking it over. “Better,” he said. Jane didn’t know what had changed, but something was different about him. More familiar. “So Jane,” he said. “You were in the middle of a story.”

Jane’s voice faded from Tony’s ears as she talked about Asgard. “What’s this?” He asked Loki, pointing to a reading from the extraction. Loki glanced at the chart. He knew this side of Tony. They would be in the lab until he dragged Tony away.

And honestly, if that meant he would keep being treated to glimpses of Tony’s intellect, that was

perfectly fine. It was amusing for Loki to watch them all marvel over what was basic knowledge. Interesting, even. Sort of endearing. Loki glanced at the chart Tony was eagerly pointing to. “Well,” Loki said, launching into what was about to be a very complicated lecture. Loki couldn't deny that he enjoyed the attention, or knowing it all. He smirked as Tony interrupted with an intriguing question. This was going to be a good afternoon indeed.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to all of you reading along, and especially to those of you that have spared a moment to comment. Those comments really are what gets this written and posted. Thank you for letting me take these characters where I have and I hope you're all getting something out of this story as it approaches its close. The next chapter will definitely be smutty, I keep meaning to get there but this story often has a mind of its own.



## Chapter 48

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had taken ages to get out of the lab. Not that Loki had particularly minded at first, when it was just the four of them. Selvig never spoke directly to him, and he wasn't expecting anything different. He preferred it. Bruce had been the tipping point.

Once Bruce came in he got into a squabble with Jane over her obvious health troubles while Jane blatantly ignored him or made flimsy excuses for not taking care of herself. It was only after Selvig backed Bruce up that Tony threw in his support, which somehow ended up with Loki being the one to end the vocal melee.

Really, if they were all going to be like this, he would be forced to seriously consider that subjugation thing again. Especially since the moment he quelled that, Steve and Rhodey appeared in running attire, and the Widow slipped in through thin air. Their friendly chatter nearly drowned out Tony, who couldn't seem to figure out how they'd all gotten into the lab like rodents and blamed it on the short comings of his mechanical servant.

Yet now that they were finally back in the bedroom and Tony was all his again, Loki could not settle down. He had imagined this moment far too many times during Asgard to be comfortable. "I'm not in the mood for dinner yet, are you?" Tony asked from the dresser. He pulled an oil slicked shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. Loki felt his stomach flip as that back was bared before him. "Unless you want to, do you want to?" Tony asked, eager for Loki's input simply because now it was possible.

He turned around when Loki didn't answer him. The god's sharp green eyes were set fervently on him, but his body language was pinched and stiff against the bed. "You, uh—" Tony's mouth wavered as he ran through the things he might've done wrong. Leave it to him to fuck it up in less than twenty-four hours. "Alright?"

Loki's eyes vanished behind a languid blink. "Alright," Loki agreed to nothing in particular. Tony looked away. He hunched down and grabbed the shirt from the floor, unwittingly showcasing the flexion of his shoulder blades. Loki's gaze trailed him as he wandered quickly towards the bathroom.

Tony turned on the sink and splashed water in his face. He grabbed his toothbrush. Scrubbing the bristles hard against his teeth, he glanced surreptitiously towards the doorway. Loki sat rigidly on the bed. Tony spit a mouthful of toothpaste into the sink. He leaned in towards the mirror at an angle that he could see Loki. The god was watching him closely.

Tony wiped off his face. He walked into the room saying, "So now that you're out from under house arrest, do you want a tour of the place or something?"

"Not particularly," Loki said.

"We'll avoid Clint's floor," Tony said. "We can have Jarvis fuck with him. That's always fun, isn't it Jarv?"

"Yes," Jarvis said dully.

Loki didn't react at all. Tony saw his eyes flicker downward, but they set back on his face a split

second later. "The city, then?" Tony suggested. "It's not all like the place we were at last night. We can go anywhere," Tony said. Loki's lips twitched before he minutely shook his head.

"I have no desire to see the city tonight," he said.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck, staring at Loki. Willing his mind to try reading Loki's. There were times that Tony could go for the dark and mysterious thing, but right now it was just making him unsure and mildly anxious. "Stay in then?" Tony asked. "Like old times? I don't have a television in here, but I could get Jarvis to project something."

"We don't need a television," Loki said. There was a subtle quirk in his voice, and the faintest hint of discomfort as he shifted his seat on the bed. One hand flexed invitingly against the sheets.

Tony's shoulders dropped. He smirked a little in the corner of his mouth. "We don't?" Tony asked, walking until he stood in front of Loki. "What will we be doing then?"

Now that he thought he'd figured it out, he wanted to hear Loki say it. He might've seen the slightest quirk in Loki's lips, but it was disguised too quickly to be certain. Instead, Loki's hands curled around his waist. "You know very well what we will be doing, Tony."

Loki relished claiming Tony's name on his tongue. It was his to call by every custom in the realms, unlike his oafish once brother. His grip on Tony's waist tightened. Naturally, Tony was oblivious to the revelry going on inside Loki's head. "I don't think I do," Tony said. He leaned into Loki, pinning him back against the bed just to be difficult. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I'm not the one that's profoundly fond of hearing his own voice," Loki said. Tony's warm hands reached back and slid around Loki's wrists.

"Debatable," Tony said, prying Loki's arms away and settling the god's wrists on either side of his head. Tony considered it a bit daring, but Loki just stared up at him from a wavy halo of black hair as if he had ordered Tony to do so. Tony gazed down expectantly into Loki's prideful face, grinning.

Loki scrambled to keep his attention on playing his face just right, but the heat curling up from the base of his spine and down his wrists was utterly distracting. Tony saw the crack in his composure and chuckled. "I'll guess then," Tony said. "Decoupage?"

"You're a twit," Loki sniped, but the bite was gone from his voice the moment Tony's warm breath passed across his lips. He felt his own breathing hasten. The man was looming over him and undoubtedly aware now of the aching erection that pressed against his thigh. Loki had made up his mind when they had walked into the room. Tony's thumbs circled the protruding veins in Loki's wrists, drawing back his attention.

"Checkers?"

Loki scoffed, turning his head to the side. A wicked grin slid across Tony's face. "Video games?" He asked, rocking his hips against Loki. The god hissed and arched towards him, twisting his head back into the bed.

"For all your intellect," Loki said as he stared at the headboard, "you are rather obtuse." He didn't know what game Tony was playing at, but he wanted to win. Instead Tony's warm mouth found the soft hollow of his jaw and sucked playfully at the skin there.

"Well," Tony said. "I can't figure it out then." He sat up, slowly rocking his hips against Loki before balancing himself on his shins and knees, leaving a thin line of air between them. He

released Loki's wrists.

Loki stared up at him, eyes shot wide and lustful, face crafted into a performance. His chest rose and fell against the light gray t-shirt, the v of its neck tousled and exposing a line of pale flesh down to his nipple. Tony licked his bottom lip slowly, deliberately, waiting.

"What, then?" Tony asked, voice cracking as he held back from laughing. "You tell me." His eyes were bright, dancing with amusement, begging Loki to play along with him. Loki's eyes narrowed into a glare.

Loki's hand shot up around his neck and Tony lost his balance, falling flush against Loki's chest. "I mean to have you," Loki growled into his ear. His breath came in ragged, shallow pants, sending a shiver down Tony's spine. "Now give me what I want and cease this display of...impunity."

Tony's brows furrowed for a second before he let out a deep sigh. "Impunity from what," he muttered. "Your godly wrath?"

"Yes," Loki said, sliding his hand down to Tony's shoulder blade and helping himself to a sharp curve of bone and sinewy muscle. Tony's chest shook as he chuckled.

"Make me," he whispered in Loki's ear.

Loki's hands flew beneath his arms and tugged him with inhuman strength up the bed, leaving Tony scrambling for balance. Faster than he could think he was pinned to the bed, Loki's hands digging into the waistband of his jeans and yanking them open. The zipper shrieked as it was ripped downward, Loki's hand diving into the gaping fabric and tugging the elastic band of Tony's boxers over his stirring cock only to abandon it carelessly behind his balls.

"Shit, alright," Tony groaned, twisting his hands down and freeing his hips from the elastic cutting into him. He struggled to kick off his jeans while Loki ignored his predicament, choosing instead to curl his tongue into the juncture between Tony's neck and shoulder. "Loki," Tony said, "a little help."

Loki rose just enough so that his hazed eyes could fall on Tony, a lazy smirk tugging on his mouth. "Of course," he purred. It took Tony a second to realize that the clothes he was wearing had vanished, as had Loki's.

Tony let out a groan. "Not fair," he muttered.

"Oh?" Loki asked, twirling his finger against Tony's peaked nipple. "Shall I put them back on?"

"No," Tony said, leaning up to press a kiss to the dip in Loki's collarbones. "Nope."

"Excellent," Loki muttered. He pressed his hand flat against Tony's sternum, fingertips catching along the arc reactor's scarring. He licked a hot, slow line across Tony's lip, closing his eyes. He had waited too long for this.

Loki's tongue slid into Tony's mouth just as brazenly and self-serving as the night before, gliding across sharp teeth experimentally. Pressed firmly to the mattress, Tony surrendered, letting his hands slide down the broad expanse of Loki's back and back up to tangle in his hair.

With magic, Loki seemed stronger than before, more like the kind of god that could take a hulk smash into concrete and still come out snarky. Tony pulled Loki's chest in tighter.

Loki's hand slid quickly down Tony's side and curled against his thigh, prying his leg out to be

more open. Tony moaned and shifted against him, his swelling cock brushing against Loki's hand. With his grip in Loki's hair he brought the god's mouth back to his, his tongue teasing Loki's swelled lip tenderly.

Loki caught Tony's bottom lip and sucked hard, his teeth coming down just a little too sharply for Tony. The man yelped and flinched against him as the metallic tang of blood spilled into their mouths.

Leaning up stiffly, Loki left Tony just enough room to wipe the blood away with his hand. "Shit. I teased you too much," Tony said, pushing out a weak chuckle. He sank back against the pillow. Loki watched him intently with a heavily guarded expression. Tony reached up and rubbed Loki's shoulder. "I'm alright," Tony said, cracking a grin. There was blood on his teeth. "I've done way worse on purpose. This is completely vanilla for me."

Loki blinked once, uncomprehending and unwilling to ask from pride. Hesitantly he leaned down, flicking his tongue against Tony's bottom lip. Tony felt magic sing across the cut. He slid his own tongue against it to find that it was perfectly fine. "Nifty," Tony muttered, rubbing the back of his hand across his lips. "You're going to have to teach me that trick," he said as Loki's lips pressed, almost apologetically, at the side of his neck.

Loki's lips were tepid for a moment before they paused, cold air greeting Tony's skin in the absence of his mouth. Tony thrustured hopefully against him.

Then Loki's mouth was back at his neck, quick and greedy as his hands raked down Tony's sides, digging his thumbs into Tony's jutting hipbones. The man moaned and writhed beneath him. Tony was his to explore, and the tang of Tony's skin reopened an ache in Loki's chest that had been there far too long. He pressed his fingers in the tender spots between Tony's ribs, feeling them for a fleeting second before moving onto something else again, adjusting Tony to his liking. His hand settled on Tony's heavy cock. He flicked his thumb across the beads of precome on its head.

Tony gasped, knocking his skull against the headboard. Loki was too much at once, frantic and forceful, overwhelming Tony before he could enjoy himself. "Loki," he said twice before catching Loki's attention. Green eyes shifted towards him. "You've got me all night," he said with his best grin. "Take it easy."

Loki faltered, missing the light tone in Tony's voice and sinking his face into the crook of Tony's neck instead. He flicked his tongue against Tony's skin like a snake, his arms and legs taking on his tension. Tony shook as he laughed. "Not that easy," Tony said, kneading his fingers into the small of Loki's back.

Then it was as if Tony had said nothing. Loki was everywhere at once again, and Tony's head was spinning. Loki was trying too hard.

Just as Tony was about to say something, Loki sat up and leaned over the side of the bed. Tony heard the drawer in the nightstand yanked open, odds and ends slamming against the wooden board. The palm of Loki's hand dug into Tony's stomach as Loki tried keeping his balance while digging out a half-finished bottle of lube.

The pressure crept into the pit of Tony's strained torso. His hand shot up to catch Loki's hip, but slid down the sweat slicked skin instead. Oblivious, Loki impatiently squeezed the bottle into his open hand. He slid down between Tony's legs, eyes flickering towards the swelled cock that arched towards Tony's stomach.

One slicked finger circled Tony's tightly puckered hole fleetingly before wedging in and Tony

wincing, kicking his leg. “Okay,” Tony said, sitting up. He slipped the bottle from Loki’s wet fingers, bending Loki down to the bed in the same motion. “Let’s stop for a second.”

Loki’s hair hung down off the end of the bed. His heart hammered in his chest as he stared at Tony, who was watching him from half-lidded soft brown eyes, a gentle grin on his lips. His skin was marked up and down with Loki’s work. Tony set a hand on Loki’s waist and was relieved when Loki didn’t flinch away. He seemed stunned.

Tony brushed his thumb back and forth against Loki’s waist. A hot flush colored Loki’s cheeks as his eyes drifted from Tony and towards the ceiling. Tony bit down on his swollen lip, assessing Loki. He guessed that the time apart had given Loki more nerves than usual, but he couldn’t be sure. He had this nagging feeling that Loki was overcompensating for something imagined.

Tony let the bottle slide from his fingers as he massaged his hand against Loki’s rigid side. It wasn’t that Tony wasn’t up for rough, but that wasn’t what this was, and Tony was never the type to lay passively and not enjoy himself. He didn’t think twice about speaking up or making sure that everyone involved was enjoying themselves. Not because he couldn’t be selfish, but because he took pride in himself.

Loki stared at the ceiling, reeling inside. His defenses were piling up as he laid still, incapable of admitting to himself that he was so overwhelmed in his own senses that he didn’t even know what worked for Tony, or that it clearly hadn’t been. His demons leapt at the opportunity to suggest that perhaps Tony had no want of him.

The mattress sunk as Tony laid down against his chest, comfortably wrapping his arms around Loki. He pressed a kiss to Loki’s temple and felt a bead of sweat roll down the side of his face. “I missed you,” he murmured.

Loki could hear nothing but his blood pounding in his ears. It had been easier to endure the threats of Thanos than lay here, utterly vulnerable as Tony pressed a kiss to his temple. There was nothing contrived to rally against, nothing but unmasked affection in Tony’s arms, and it was *excruciating*.

Tony set his chin against Loki’s chest. It was boring to lay there, waiting for Loki to relax a little, but the way Loki’s arms came back to life and slowly wrapped around his back was more than worth it. Tony raised his head to see that Loki was watching him again. A mischievous flare flickered in his eyes, and Tony felt relieved to see it again. “Stark—” Loki said, wetting his dry lips.

“Tony,” the man corrected him. “You called me Tony today.”

A grin quirked up onto Loki’s lips. “I have called you that before,” Loki said.

“Yeah?” Tony asked.

“Must I remind your feeble memory?” Loki asked, voice lilting between playful and arrogant. Tony smirked, shaking his head.

He leaned down beside Loki’s ear. “Let me,” he whispered. Tony sat back up, grabbing the bottle of lube. He let Loki watch him finger himself open, noting that yeah, that was definitely a thing they were going to be doing more of in the future because it was getting to them both. Tony’s cock throbbed and he moaned, arching into his hand while staring right into Loki’s eyes, raw with lust.

He could feel Loki’s pulse in his hand as he grabbed the god’s hard length and arranged himself. With a loud moan, he took all of Loki inside of him. Tony’s head dropped down as he gasped in a

breath. Every tiny movement emphasized the thick cock spreading him open inside. Tony groaned, hands seeking an anchor.

Loki's breath shuddered as Tony's hands set against his sides. The tight, slick heat of Tony clenched against the tension in his cock and he bucked up into him, drawing a low cry from Tony. It struck him perfectly inside. Tony's wet lips fell open as his breathing quickened.

Tony's hips began moving, rising and falling against the long cock that drove deep into him. He felt Loki's hands clench at his hips and barely heard his own shout as Loki thrust, wiping Tony's mind clear of thought.

Tony's eyes parted open, just enough to see Loki's slack jawed face, flinching in pleasure at each movement. Tony saw the blush that had curled around Loki's neck and grinned, dropping his head back as he panted with exhaustion.

He jerked as Loki's hand found his cock and moaned as it stroked, almost adoringly along his length, tugging slowly. He clenched hard around the cock inside him, rocking his hips desperately towards friction.

Loki felt warm seed hit his chest before he spilled inside of Tony, crying out as he arched hard into the mattress, thrusting up into the heat of Tony's body above him.

Tony's limp limbs collapsed around him. Tony buried his face against Loki's neck, breathing in the scent of him with hard breaths.

When Loki's thoughts finally caught up with him it was only to remind him not to let Tony go again. He had made the right choice. For once he thought that he had finally, actually made a choice that was truly good for him. This would work out. He groaned against Tony's neck, shutting his eyes and tracing his finger up and down Tony's spine.

Tony pulled off slowly, arms shaking as he braced himself against the bed. He couldn't have cared less about the mess as he swung a wet thigh back over Loki with every intention of passing out. His body was limp and satiated. He was dimly aware of Loki's arm cradling around his head and lips pressing to his forehead whispering, "—mortal mine."

Within moments Tony's breathing turned quiet and shallow. Loki curled in towards Tony's warm body, studying the man's face. Tony's long eyelashes curled at haphazard angles, just like his disheveled brown hair. Loki grinned, pressing a short lock of hair flat against Tony's head just to watch it spring right back up. Exhaustion was claiming him too, but for as long as Loki fought off sleep, he contentedly watched over the mortal that had dared to want him.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed, and as always, thank you for reading!

*optional author meta* I spent an inordinate amount of time mulling over these two in this chapter, and how their growth and dynamics in this fic would build with their canon characters. I like the Loki sex god trope that's frequent in frostiron fic, but ultimately in this I decided that it would play out differently. Tony's comfortable saying what he wants whereas Loki's self-absorption can make him less intuitive here than in other scenarios. I could see canon Loki playing out a lot of different ways in

sex and relationships, given that he hasn't had a relationship arc the way canon Tony has in the cinema verse. There were a lot of dynamics available to play with so I hope you enjoyed it. ;)

## Chapter 49

Jane was down in his lab before Tony woke up, this morning as always. In the few weeks since they'd returned, Jane had recovered her health and practically moved in there. Darcy appeared during odd hours. Tony strongly suspected they correlated with times that Sam Wilson dropped by the tower to hangout with Steve.

Jane was straightening a stack of papers by knocking them down against the desk when Tony walked in. He set his coffee beside her and comfortably grabbed a set of switches he'd been toying with the day before. Jane grinned. "Of course he wouldn't put it in a supply closet or something, huh?"

Tony glanced up to see her gesture towards the long golden staff that hung horizontally along the wall. Loki's drawings of the scepter were still clustered beside it from the night that Tony had taped them up. "Beats a poster, I guess," Tony said.

"Do you think he's saving it for something?" Jane asked. Tony easily picked up on the teasing in her voice, but he could not place why she would tease about it. At the uncertain look on his face, Jane's lips twisted to the side. "You know what it is, right?"

Tony didn't like that question because he didn't have an answer for the something it implied. He shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "It's nothing," Tony said in the exact same way that Loki had said it to him.

"Nothing?" Jane asked. Her fingers slid away from the papers she'd been straightening. "That," Jane said, "is half of the ruling staff of Asgard. It'd be like hanging half of the crown on the wall." She sat down on the edge of the desk, watching the curiosity on Tony's face mingle with a heavier emotion. "He told you about Gungnir, didn't he?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "He just failed to mention that *that* was Gungnir."

Jane crossed her arms and quietly looked back over at the scepter. Tony combed his fingers through his hair. He reached forward for his coffee and took a long sip. Tony hadn't thought twice when Loki told him it was nothing and hung it up without ceremony. Loki said that he brought it because the metal would be interesting for Tony to study.

Tony hadn't challenged him about anything for the first few days of his return, simply because he was happy to have him back. "Maybe he didn't want you to think that he cared," Jane said. Her voice brought his attention back to the room.

Tony set his coffee down and then thought better of it. "That's reassuring," Tony said gruffly, taking another long sip.

"Well you'd worry," Jane said. "Wouldn't you?" Tony hurried to swallow the coffee in his mouth, heat burning down his throat. "Not like worry-worry. Just...you'd think about it a lot."

He coughed up coffee. A tear rolled out of his eye as he recovered. "It's not like I'd get on his case about it," Tony said.

"No," Jane agreed. "But he'd know that you would think about it, and what it meant, and that would bring attention back to him, wouldn't it?"

"He loves attention," Tony said drably.



“The right kind of attention,” Jane said. She stood up from the desk, brushing her hands down her jeans. “I know the kinds of things he hides. Thor was a little more aware than Loki gave him credit for. He talked about him all the time.”

“Like Thor knows him,” Tony said, comforting himself with coffee again. His opinion of Thor sounded more and more like Loki’s worst opinion of Thor lately, mirroring Loki’s worst assumptions about his not-brother and adding Tony’s own sense of self-righteous contempt to them.

Unwilling to go down that path with Tony again, Jane steered the conversation towards something else. “So,” she said cheerfully. “How much longer until the new lab facility’s finished? I’m sure you’re looking forward to having this place to yourself again.”

Tony’s sour expression faded instantly. “Two more weeks,” he said. “And don’t think I won’t be hanging around in those too.”

Jane grinned. “Of course not,” she said. Jane picked up the papers she’d been arranging and slid them down into a drawer before turning on a computer monitor. As Jane went back to work, Tony stared up at Gungnir. Of course Loki would leave a vital thing like that out. He wasn’t sure why Loki did it, or if Jane was right. Tony just knew that he wasn’t about to let it go.

Unable to stay focused, Tony decided to procrastinate by visiting the kitchen. Steve and Rhodey were there at the table. They broke from some intense conversation when Tony walked in, greeting him a little too eagerly. “Back to domestic bliss, huh?” Rhodey kidded him. Tony glanced over from the cabinet just in time to see a sly smile creep across Steve’s face. If Steve got going, his sarcasm would only encourage Rhodey further.

“Yeah,” Tony said, setting his coffee mug on the counter. “I came here to get my kiss the cook apron, but it’s gone, so I’m going to guess you two have it.”

Rhodey glanced over at Steve, raising his eyebrow. Steve shrugged dramatically, shaking his head. He pointed at Rhodey questioningly. Rhodey pretended to consider that before frowning for Steve and turning back to Tony. “Looks like we don’t have it.”

“Huh,” Tony said skeptically. He heard one or both of them choke back a laugh just as the doors to the kitchen opened. Clint walked in with dirty dishes in his hands. Tony stepped away from the dishwasher.

Suddenly tension strained the room. “We ran through the park,” Rhodey said to break it. “And we didn’t even get stopped for autographs.”

“They probably didn’t recognize you like this,” Steve said, rolling his eyes back and sticking out his tongue like he was exhausted.

“Next time I run in the suit and we’ll see who’s laughing,” Rhodey said.

Their lighthearted exchange went unnoticed by Clint and Tony. Tony leaned back against the counter, watching the faint aqua glint in Clint’s eye wink back at him. It was driving him mad.

Clint straightened his back, recognizing the look on Tony’s face all too well. He had heard Tony’s stupid theory about magic. He’d even endured a sad but well-meaning call from Selvig, going on about some extraction. It was bullshit, and if Tony really thought that Loki had helped Selvig and not just used the opportunity to alter Selvig’s mind, he was an idiot. There was no way in hell that

Clint was letting that green eyed bastard anywhere near him.

Clint stooped down and tossed the dishes inside, slamming the door shut. Rhodey and Steve were joking at the table. Their laughter sounded distant. Clint turned his back and started for the stairs. He did not expect Tony to follow him.

Clint had unwittingly provided the perfect distraction for Tony. "Hey," Tony called out after him, following him into the stairwell. Clint's feet shuffled loudly downstairs, forcing Tony to rush after.

"What," Clint said, not looking back.

"I'm sick of playing battleship. Just make a move already," Tony said. Clint threw open the door for the common room floor. With a heavy gait he marched over to the couch and flipped the television on, tossing his feet up onto the coffee table. "Hey," Tony said. "What happened to we're fine?" He asked over the rising television volume.

"I never said we were fine," Clint said. "I said we were okay if I didn't have to be around him." Clint dropped his elbow against the armrest and leaned into it. "Now I have to fucking live with him," he half-muttered.

Loki walked into the lab, expecting to find Tony. Instead there was only Jane, engrossed in something on a screen. Seeing no need to wander the entire tower, Loki fell back on magic to locate Tony. Once he sensed the right floor he vanished.

"I'm not forcing you to stay," Tony said. He knew the moment that he heard his own words that he would be upset if Clint left. Regardless of the situation, Tony had made a floor just for Clint, and it would sting if he left.

Clint scoffed. "I'm not staying for you," he said, looking at the television. "I'm staying because I'm an Avenger. I'm committed."

The last sentence got under Tony's skin. "Right," Tony said. "You're the committed one." He took a step towards the couch, entirely unaware of the god materializing into the room. "Committed. Hmm, that doesn't seem like the right word." He acted like he was thinking carefully about it. "Maybe stubborn?"

"Stubborn," Clint said, "is what's written in your file."

"I've seen your file, Clint."

"I doubt it," Clint said. "You wouldn't be pulling this shit if you had." Clint slid his foot down against the ledge of the coffee table, pressing the ridge into the arch of his foot. He hated the way his voice sounded. Hated the bile creeping into his throat. Hated the way he was tensing in anticipation of Tony's next move. This wasn't him.

Clint couldn't remember the last time he'd felt like himself. Everything had become a rakish nightmare of Loki's angular face crawling through his waking hours and sleepless nights.

Clint swallowed hard. Tony had been in a great mood since Loki got back. He didn't see why Tony had to go and break their unspoken truce now.

“The only shit I’m pulling is trying to help you,” Tony said. He was convinced that Clint would be happier if he’d accept the offer.

Loki took a shallow step back towards the wall. Neither mortal had noticed him, and he was too engrossed in their exchange to consider leaving. Loki pulled a veil of invisibility over himself, subconsciously holding his breath.

“You mean you’re trying to help you,” Clint said. He glanced towards the door. It wasn’t too late to leave.

“Why won’t you let Loki extract it?” Tony demanded. “Are you afraid he has cooties?”

Clint pushed up off the couch. “You know damn well I don’t want him near me,” Clint said.

“He’s not going to do anything,” Tony said. “I’ll make sure it’s like Sesame Street. He’ll be as approachable as Elmo. Well, maybe Oscar, but completely fine. You’ll be fine.”

“Is this all one big joke to you?” Clint asked, spinning around. The couch was a welcome barrier between them. “I told you to keep him the hell away from me and you’re begging me to let him closer.”

“It’ll help,” Tony said impatiently. “It’s worse because he’s closer. I know it is.” The humor had slipped from Tony’s face and become something terse instead. “You’ll feel better,” he said carefully.

Clint shook his head. He hadn’t realized how hard he had clenched his jaw. “No,” he said. He broke eye contact. It hurt to see the sincerity in Tony’s eyes, to know that Tony really believed it. “I’ve asked Fury to send me on every mission he can to keep me out of here. That’s what’s going to help me.”

“Fury? Does Fury know what’s going on?”

Clint strained to relax his jaw. “No,” he said. “But if he did, Fury would be bending over backwards to cover your ass.”

“After he killed me for it,” Tony said.

“Don’t say a damn thing about Director Fury. He’s stood up for us more times than you realize and he’s the reason you have half the freedoms you have. And now you’re asking him to cover for you about this?” Clint shook his head, stiff muscles aching. “He doesn’t deserve putting up with that. That’s why I haven’t told him.”

The words hit even harder than Clint had intended. Tony couldn’t have been more numb if he’d been dropped in ice water. Clint made it to the door before a feeble retort left Tony’s mouth. “Fine. Stay miserable.”

Clint fake saluted him from behind and vanished through the door.

“Fuck,” Tony whispered. He raked his hands back through his hair and breathed out a heavy sigh. Tony’s hand dropped to his pocket. He pulled out the pendant. For a moment he thought it was still vibrating, but it lay still and lifeless in his palm.

Natasha was sprawled across her bed, reading a book with her elbows propping her up. She had

accepted Jarvis' request to let Tony on her floor and was completely unperturbed when he entered fraught and slightly jumpy.

"Natasha," he said casually, helping himself to a seat by her desk. "Catching up on Oprah's book club?"

"I never need to catch up," Natasha said. "I'm reading ahead."

"Right," Tony smirked. Natasha flipped the book shut and placed her hand over the back cover. It was the dirtiest, trashiest book she could find, but there was no need for Tony to know that. She stared at him expectantly. "Seen Clint?" Tony asked.

Natasha sat up, tossing the book back onto her pillow. She crossed her legs and leaned her weight back onto her hands. "If you've come to ask me to convince him to let you try that magic extraction, you're wasting your time."

"It'll help," Tony said. He hunched forward in his chair, staring directly at her with a look that had been successful in the past. "Please. I know he has nightmares."

"And I know that there are people in your life that you'd never want to see again either," Natasha said. "No matter how much someone else liked them."

"All I'm asking for is ten seconds," Tony said. "That's it."

"And what then?" Natasha asked calmly. "Tony. The extraction isn't the issue. Even if Loki healed him, Clint wouldn't start liking him. Clint doesn't have to forgive Loki. He doesn't owe Loki that."

Tony licked his lip. Natasha had a talent for cutting to the heart of things. "Even if he did," Natasha continued, "that doesn't mean that he would forgive you. They're separate issues."

"Okay. Thanks for the free therapy session," Tony said, standing up. He started for the door.

"Listen to Clint when he tells you what he wants," Natasha said knowingly. Tony didn't say anything to her advice. Natasha fell back against her bed and dug the book out. She spun through the pages to where she'd left off, getting back into it even before Tony had disappeared into the elevator.

Tony sulked back down to the lab and got lost in work with Jane. When she brought up dinner, Tony realized that he hadn't seen Loki since that morning. He considered calling him but got distracted by the arrival of Sam. Four hours and one newly redesigned flight suit later, Tony wandered upstairs to find Loki asleep in bed.

Loki heard Tony enter, hesitantly check that he was asleep, and leave again. Once Tony was gone, Loki rolled over in bed and stared at the headboard. He had spent the better part of the day devising ways to appease Clint without too much effort on his part.

It wasn't that Loki felt particular sympathy for Clint. The mortal had lost the battle and Loki couldn't quite feel for the particular stir that had caused among the Midgardians. It was that it troubled Tony, and that was a problem.

An unhappy Tony was never a good thing. Loki rolled onto his back and stared up at the dark ceiling. He could sense that Tony and the pendant were somewhere around the kitchen, and guessed that he was pouring a drink. He would taste it on Tony's breath in the morning.

Loki curled his fingers in the sheets. He loathed it, but it seemed like the best way, perhaps the only way to smooth things over, was to approach Clint directly.

He cursed the Norns as he sat up. He had avoided Clint entirely, and been content doing so. Reluctantly, he began walking towards the gym. He sensed that Clint was somewhere down there, and appearing by magic would hardly do him any favors.

Three floors from the gym, the elevator stopped. Loki dropped his head back against the wall, screaming internally. "Hello," Steve said, stepping inside. He glanced at the buttons. "Gym, huh?"

Loki was certain that there was something to Steve's words, some sort of humor, but he could not place it. "Good evening," Loki said.

Steve smirked to himself. His blonde hair fell just past his eyebrow, unmanaged on one side. "You tell Tony I found his apron," Steve said as the doors opened. Loki looked critically his way, but Steve was already halfway into the gym. Loki spotted Clint on the far end. Clint saw Steve and nodded. Loki couldn't make out their friendly conversation as he stood leaning back against the elevator wall, arms tightly crossed. He could not carry this out with the Captain there.

He vanished in a pouty puff of emerald smoke. Materializing in the bedroom, he flung himself on the mattress and proceeded to pass out. In the early morning hours Tony's blind hand stumbled into his ribs and woke him. The man proceeded to collapse against his side, breaking into lengthy conversations in his sleep. Loki caught his name a few times, but mostly Tony spoke nonsense.

Loki woke early. Tony was asleep at the far end of the bed, snoring and kicking his foot. With an unspoken spell Loki dressed and vanished.

Clint checked his phone for the fifth time in three minutes, hoping for a message from Director Fury. He needed to get out of the tower for a while. Clint poked at his breakfast and stared bleakly around the kitchen.

He could not taste the scrambled eggs in his mouth. Everything was bland. He stabbed his fork into the remaining eggs, scraping them back and forth across the plate. He had thought he was fine. He really had. But thinking it and being it were two different things, and everyone else's apparent nonchalance towards Loki was not helping.

Hell, Steve had even said that Tony was good for Loki. Rhodey had smirked in a way that Clint couldn't figure out when Steve had said it, and it all compacted to make Clint feel like he was the only sane person there. Sharing minds went both ways. Clint knew exactly what Loki was capable of, and the Asgardian made his skin crawl.

Clint felt his stomach lurch. There was a faint pounding in his temples. That was the other thing, he thought as he squeezed his eyes shut. Since Loki had gained free reign of the tower, he had developed all sorts of disconcerting symptoms.

"Hello," a voice said. Clint thought it was another false illusion, but the hairs on the back of his neck stood up in a way that forced him to whip around.

Loki stood against the back wall of the kitchen, staring at him with the same vivid eyes that Clint

remembered so well.

Now Loki was dressed in slim dress trousers and a loose v neck shirt that looked a lot like Tony's, but the posture was entirely that of the Loki that Clint knew. No matter how he presented himself, Clint would recognize him for what he was.

He swallowed the eggs like slop, his throat constricting as the tasteless mass sank down. "—the hell do you want?"

Loki sauntered slowly towards the table, twisting Clint's glass around before taking a seat across from him. "It has come to my attention," Loki said, picking up Clint's water glass and gazing at the few bubbles that trickled to the surface, "that you have something that belongs to me."

Clint felt a bead of sweat roll down the side of his face. He had to stay calm. Loki glanced sideways at him. The fucker had the nerve to act bored about it. Clint could not find his voice. "Give it back to me," Loki said.

"Fuck you," Clint sputtered out. He braced his arms against the table and pushed up.

Loki grimaced. He would not be spoken to like that by this mortal, but he stood little chance of winning if he did not persuade the archer on his own terms. "Barton," Loki said.

Hearing his name called in that voice felt like fingers wrapping around the back of his neck. Clint stepped back towards the door, keeping his eyes trained on Loki. The god's expression darkened as Clint retreated.

"Do not," Loki said authoritatively. "Act so stubbornly."

Clint felt his mouth come back to life as he sneered. This moment was even harder than he'd imagined. He was convinced that at any second Loki would take control again, and this time the consequences would be so much worse.

Clint saw Tony's life fade in his hands, heard Loki's laughter in his head. He had tried to warn Tony, he had. Why hadn't Tony listened?

"Barton," Loki said. The mortal's eyes had glazed over. He snapped back at his name. "I will relieve you of my magic. I swear that no harm will come to you in doing so."

It was almost funny, Clint thought, to hear Loki swear something so benign. Almost.

"Bar-ton."

Clint's legs would not take him any closer to the door. *Damn it*, he thought over and over and over. "Allow me a moment," Loki said. "Just give me your hand."

"No," Clint said.

Loki leaned back against his chair. He draped his arm over the back of it, evaluating Clint. After a moment he held up his hand. A shimmer of blue light appeared above it. Loki tilted his wrist back and forth, launching a blue ball of light out and back to his hand repetitively. "You can feel it, can't you?" He asked. The ball flew past Clint. He felt the sickness inside him surge. "I can take that away."

"Yeah right," Clint said. "You're just looking for a chance."

“I am aiding you,” Loki said crossly. The blue light went out in an instant. “Cease this paranoid foolishness. Do you think I would waste my time persuading you if I had ill intent? I assure you, I do not need your permission to take what is mine.”

“Alright,” Clint said. “Let’s say I believe your bullshit.” He was pleased that his voice did not tremble, despite the quake in his limbs. “Then you just want your shit back. Why should I give it to you?”

Loki’s incredulous laugh touched the base of Clint’s spine with a chill. “Because,” Loki said. “It plagues you.”

Clint’s bow arm twitched reflexively. Loki opened his hand and laid it on the table. “Perhaps you could look at it this way. Returning it to me will relieve you of both Tony and me.”

“Tony’s an asshole,” Clint said. “But he’s not the one I have a problem with.” Loki’s lips pulled back in a hard, flat line.

“What must I do to assure your goodwill?”

Clint let the question hang a minute before answering. “You don’t get my goodwill,” Clint said. Saying it aloud restored his courage. “You used me as a puppet to murder people I cared about without any remorse. You might have tricked Tony into thinking that you turned over a new leaf, but the moment he comes to his senses, I’m the first in line to kick your ass. You got that? It’s bad enough that you did what you’ve already done, but I’m not forgiving you for whatever you end up doing to Tony either.”

Loki rose slowly from the table. “I have done Tony no wrong.” His tone sent a fresh wave of fear through Clint. This time Loki spoke with true conviction. “You will not make such accusations towards me.” His eyes narrowed into vicious, untamable lines. “What do you crave? My apology? Then I apologize for your mistreatment.” Loki breathed in slowly, reigning in his anger. “I will not indulge your false accusations.”

“We’ll see,” Clint said. He reached for the door.

“Leaving a mess as always, Barton,” Loki spat. Clint glanced at his plates. Uncertain of which would piss off Loki more, he decided to grab the plates with a wide, pointed smile.

He was completely unaware of the faint graze of Loki’s hand past his as Loki pushed the glass towards him. Loki’s magic eagerly leapt back to him. The glint faded from the archer’s eye. Clint tossed the plates in the sink with a loud clatter. He slammed the door behind himself.

Loki sat back down in the chair and leaned back, balancing on its rear legs. That had not gone well at all.

Loki wandered down to the lab, sullen and moody. Laughter greeted him as the doors opened. Tony was sitting in the center of the room with Steve, Rhodey, and Jane standing around his computer chair.

Bright red fabric pooled in Tony’s hands. “If I’d known that you wanted to see me in this, I would’ve put it on years ago,” Tony told Steve, challenging him with a deviant smirk.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Rhodey chided him.

“It’s not flattery if it’s true,” Tony said, swiveling the chair towards him. Tony slipped a thin red band over his head and let the fabric drape haphazardly down his chest. “There,” Tony said. “What’s that do for you, huh Rogers?” He taped his foot against Steve’s shin.

Steve grinned. “I can do better,” he said. Tony’s mouth dropped open indignantly.

Jane heard footsteps and glanced up. “Why don’t you ask him?” She asked, grabbing Tony’s shoulders and swiveling him to see Loki.

“Hey,” Tony said, enlivened. He brushed the fabric open so that Loki could see the entirety of the apron as if fell flat across his chest and draped over his open legs. “You know you have to do what it says, right?” He asked, flicking his finger across the white printed words.

“What?” Loki asked. He raised an eyebrow tauntingly at Tony. “You wish for me to kiss Rogers?” In several long strides he strolled over to Steve, standing dangerously close. “Well, Rogers? You are the only chef present.” He placed one hand on Steve’s shoulder, staring back at Tony.

“Hey!” Tony whined. “I’ve microwaved things!”

Rhodey’s laughter echoed in the room as Loki leaned away from Steve. The Captain swallowed, glancing over at Tony. “You’ve never seen Steve cook anything,” Tony said. “Ever.”

Loki hummed like he disagreed. “You haven’t,” Tony said, staring at Steve for backup. “Steve?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said, playing right along.

“I think he has,” Jane said.

“I am going to go make something right now,” Tony said, standing up.

“Please don’t,” Rhodey said. “We don’t want the fire department to show up.”

“Ha-ha,” Tony said.

“Let’s save Tony the embarrassment and go out for lunch,” Steve said, brushing past Loki and heading for the door.

“Sounds alright to me,” Rhodey said, following his lead. Tony hurried to catch up, loudly carrying on after them. Jane glanced at Loki and then followed.

Tony glanced back over his shoulder. “Come on, Rudolph, you started this mess,” he called back to Loki.

Loki strode over to Tony’s side, tugging at one of the loose apron strings. “I am not the one wearing this,” he said.

“That can be changed,” Tony said, slipping it off over his head and handing it to Loki. “Start cooking,” Tony said.

Tony was halfway through his food coma when he heard the common room doors open. He cracked an eye open to see Clint enter cautiously. Tony shut his eye.

“Where’s Loki?” Clint asked. Tony rolled over onto his side.



"I'm asleep," he said.

"Do you want to tell me why you sent Loki to me after I explicitly told you to keep him away?"

Tony's eyes snapped open. He sat up, propping his back against the couch's arm rest. Tony hadn't had a moment alone to talk with Loki since yesterday. He hadn't been able to ask him about Gungnir, let alone send him to Clint.

Clint angled one hand against his hip. "Figures," Clint said.

"I didn't," Tony said.

"I can tell," Clint said. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Listen. Tell him to fuck off already."

"Okay, Legolas. I'll tell him right after I tell you."

"Great," Clint said. He crossed his arms protectively against his chest. He'd made up his mind. If he couldn't get out of the tower on a mission immediately, then he'd have to make living at the tower manageable. "It's simple," Clint said. "Keep him away from me. That's it."

"I'm not his keeper," Tony said.

"Anymore," Clint said.

"Don't go there Katniss," Tony warned.

"I'm giving you one simple thing to do," Clint said. "Just do it."

"It's not up to me," Tony said.

"What? You can't relay a message?"

"What do you want from him, Clint?"

"Really?" Clint asked. He flexed his jaw. "What I'd really like is for Thor to come pick him up permanently, but it looks like that's not an option."

"It's not," Tony promised. "Thor can't set foot in here."

"Why not?" Clint asked. "And don't tell me some boo-hoo bullshit about how mistreated poor, defenseless Loki was. Thor came and cleaned up his alien war for us. He didn't buy Loki's crap, and neither should you."

The doors opened and Steve walked in, blocking the start of a very ugly argument. "Hey," Steve said to Clint. "Natasha's looking for you."

"Oh. Right," Clint said. He left without a second glance.

Tony reluctantly met Steve's eyes with restrained tension. Steve's gaze flickered towards the absent space Clint had left. He let out a hard sigh. "Yeah," Tony said.

Steve took a seat on the couch. "I know you don't want to hear this, but Clint's just not going to be okay with Loki." He patted Tony's knee, earning a dubious look from the man. "That's just how it is."

"I can't keep Loki hidden from him," Tony said. "I'm not going to tell Loki he can't go

somewhere. We did that long enough.”

Steve laced his hands together and leaned down over his knees like he was tired.

Tony stared at Steve for a while without saying anything. Maybe he was right. He couldn't make Clint forgive Loki, let alone like him. Clint didn't owe Loki that. And hell, Tony thought Clint was an asshole, but that didn't mean he wanted Clint to leave. He wanted Clint around.

“Loki seemed to enjoy lunch,” Steve said.

Tony felt a tiny smirk creep up into the corner of his mouth. He remembered Loki's face as he had squirted a ketchup bottle all over his fries and assured him that was exactly the best way to eat them. The god hadn't been crazy about getting ketchup on his fingers. “I was a little surprised that I didn't have to bribe him to come along,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “It's almost like he likes you.” He grinned, laying his arms across the back of the couch.

“He likes me?” Tony asked. “How do you know? Did he write our names in his notebook? Are our initials carved into the drywall somewhere?”

“Not that I know of,” Steve said.

“Oh,” Tony said, reaching for the remote. “That's disappointing.” As the sound of the television filled the room, Tony forgot about his spat with Clint. By the time Steve left and he had wandered back down to the lab, he felt settled. He'd let things with Clint go back to the way they were.

“Jarvis,” Tony said. “Where's Loki? If he's lounging around in that apron and you didn't tell me about it, I'll dismantle you for real this time.”

“I have global backups,” Jarvis said coolly. “It would be a wasted effort.”

“Smart ass,” Tony said. He had shut down all of the monitors in the lab. It was dark aside from a few lights illuminating the way to the doors.

Tony turned his hand over, watching the shadows play across his skin. “He is upstairs,” Jarvis said.

“That's specific,” Tony said.

“Your floor.”

“Asleep or not?”

It was a moment before Jarvis replied, “he seems to be pacing, Sir.” The computer chair rattled as Tony stood.

“Better go see what bright eyes is up to,” Tony said, killing the lights. Halfway to his floor the doors opened and Clint stepped in. “What floor?” Tony asked.

“Natasha's is fine,” Clint said. Tony pressed the button.

“You're not going to invite me along for super spy bingo?”

Clint relaxed. It looked like they were back to their old truce, and he was fine with that. He didn't have the energy to bicker. "It's against the super spy code," Clint said seriously.

"That's disappointing," Tony said.

"I'll let you know if we change the rules," Clint said as the doors opened. "Just don't hold your breath on it."

"Maybe I'll just become a spy," Tony said. He heard Clint laugh weakly as the doors closed. He hoped that meant that they were back to the way things had been. He was still angry, and he knew Clint was angry, but this was truce enough for now. They'd figure it out eventually.

Loki froze mid step when Tony walked into the room. His hair fell over his shoulder as he looked up from the floor. "You know, when I'm trying to convince Clint that you're not plotting to rule the world, the least you could do is quit with the overlord pacing thing," Tony said.

"There is no pleasing that mortal," Loki said. He slipped his fingers together behind his back. "Perhaps I should threaten to divulge what happened in Budapest. That would silence him."

"Blackmailing is not how we make friends, Loki," Tony said in his best parent voice.

Loki's gaze slid away from Tony. "We shall see if his temperament improves without my magic," he said.

"Yeah. About that. I don't think that's an option with Clint right now," Tony said. "Maybe in a while, but I think we're going to have to wait. I'm not getting through to him."

"Nor I," Loki said, "but it is already done."

"What do you mean it's already done?"

"I slipped it from him when we were in the kitchen," Loki said. Tony's hand rose slowly to his forehead.

"Loki," he said, dragging his hand down his face and peering lifelessly out from his fingers. "That is not going to go over well." Loki shrugged his shoulders and moved towards the dresser. "Seriously," Tony said. "When he finds out you did it without asking, he's going to flip."

"He has no way of knowing," Loki said. Tony walked away from him and sat down on the edge of the bed. He took the pendant from his pocket and dropped it on the nightstand, along with his cellphone.

When Tony raised his head Loki was staring at him. "Is that not better?" Loki asked. "Is that not what Barton needed?"

Tony sighed and let himself fall flat against the bed, leaving his feet on the floor. "Clint's just... Clint. Don't worry about it. Why'd you go to him today anyway? I thought you wanted to avoid him as much as he avoids you."

"I simply tire of Barton's whimpering."

"Loki," Tony said, half-reprimanding. He could complain about Clint, but he didn't want Loki to. The god came to the edge of the bed, standing just before Tony's feet. He did not get up.

"I dislike his effect on you," Loki said.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you hung up *Gungnir*,” Tony said. He sat up and caught his hands behind Loki’s thighs before the god could back away. “You told me what Jane had was a walking stick. That it was scrap metal.”

Loki set his hands on Tony’s shoulders but wouldn’t look at him. Tony’s hands dropped lower, kneading briefly against the backs of his knees before retreating to Tony’s sides. “Because it is nothing.”

“It’s significantly more than nothing,” Tony said. Loki’s hands trailed up his neck and cupped his face. He tilted the man’s head back.

“I said it was nothing,” Loki said. He brushed his thumb across Tony’s beard. “A reminder of nothing.”

“A reminder, huh?” Tony said. He slipped from Loki’s hands and fell back down flat against the bed. Loki’s weight followed. “Do you really want that thing hanging up?” Tony asked into his ear.

“Yes,” Loki said.

Tony wrapped his arms around Loki’s back, listening to the breaths that came with each rise and fall of his chest. Loki’s eyes fell closed. He could hear Tony’s heart pumping beneath bone and tissue.

“What then of Barton,” Loki asked. His voice was half muffled by Tony’s shirt.

“If you two keep up the mutual avoidance thing,” Tony said, “I think it’ll be fine. Mostly.” Loki’s chest pressed into his stomach as the god braced himself with his arms to see Tony’s face.

“And you?” Loki asked.

“I’ll manage,” Tony said. He grinned, blinking slowly as a yawn came. “You?”

“Naturally,” Loki said. Tony’s arms pulled him back down. Loki rested his chin on Tony’s chest. “Perhaps we should watch one of those cop dramas you are so fond of.”

“I’m not fond of them. You’re fond of them,” Tony said.

“Oh?” Loki asked, standing up from the bed. Tony pulled himself up completely and moved until his back was against the headboard.

“Fine,” Tony said to the look Loki was giving him. “I like them.” To reward him, Loki sat down on his side of the bed. He called on Jarvis to project the television.

“Was that so hard?” Loki asked. Tony glowered at him, but that only earned a pleased smile from the god. Loki swung his feet over into Tony’s lap.

“Ughhh,” Tony moaned. “This again? I’ll pay somebody to rub your feet. I’ll send you to a spa.” Loki flexed his toes. “I’ll send you to ten spas!”

“I don’t want someone else to do it,” Loki said. He leaned over and wrapped his arm around Tony’s shoulder. His lips parted so that he could lick a slow line down the edge of Tony’s ear, nibbling faintly. “I want you to do it,” he whispered.

Tony could’ve kicked himself for teaching Loki that ear thing. He hadn’t known it would turn into a weapon. He grabbed one of Loki’s feet and squeezed hard. “I should’ve known you had a foot

fetish when I saw those leather boots.”

“This hardly counts as a fetish,” Loki muttered. “Especially compared to what you have told me of yours.”

Tony bristled as Loki laughed slowly, deep in his throat. “That was one time, and I’m going to figure yours out,” Tony said, massaging Loki’s foot as he focused on the television to avoid thinking about the burn crawling up his neck. “I’m going to figure all of yours out,” he promised.

“I doubt it,” Loki said. His words only added fuel to Tony’s fire. The man’s hands worked harder against his feet, and if a moan slipped from his lips, he didn’t notice.

“I’ve got time,” Tony assured him. Loki’s feet flexed at his ankles.

“Use your thumbs more,” Loki said.

## Chapter 50

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The security door groaned as Tony pushed it open. The fluorescent lighting of Loki's old room flooded past him. Loki was seated at the counter, brushing one thumb over the other. He stared blankly at Tony before returning his attention to the dull countertop.

Tony's footsteps echoed against the concrete floors as he made his way over, reminded of their many encounters that had begun just like this. "Feeling nostalgic?" Tony asked, sitting at the other barstool.

Loki leaned his head against his palm, setting his elbow against the countertop. "No," he said, calm and indifferent, although there was something vaguely melancholic about him. Tony reached over and grabbed his chin, tilting his head to the side.

"How long are you going to keep this?" He asked, studying the bright red cut running down Loki's cheek. The fin of Clint's arrow had struck it nearly a week ago, and it had not healed in the slightest.

Tony strongly suspected that Loki had allowed the arrow to make contact, even if Loki wouldn't admit to it. Loki turned his head away, slipping from Tony's grip. He hadn't been able to restrain himself from telling Clint what he'd done. Tony assumed it was because he wanted credit, or to get under Clint's skin, or a little bit of both. When the smoke from that fallout had cleared, Tony had wound up promising Clint a new bow system as a treaty.

"Fine," Tony said. "But I'm sick of looking at it." He went into the bathroom. Loki moved his cheek so that the mark would be in Tony's full view again when he came out. A drawer slammed closed.

Tony returned and not a second later did Loki feel something cool and slick swipe over his cheek. Tony tore open the paper wrapping containing an Iron Man bandage and peeled the adhesive tabs off, sticking it to Loki's face. Tony grabbed the antibiotic ointment and bandage box, rattling it. "There," he said.

Loki's hand went to his face with a scowl. "That's going to look great in your press photos today," Tony said.

Loki tore the bandage from his face and flicked it at Tony, sniggering as it landed squarely against his shirt collar and fell inside. Tony's spine curled in revulsion as he reached in for the bandage and threw it against the counter. When he looked up the mark on Loki's face had vanished. "I knew it," Tony said.

"Knew what?" Loki asked coyly, rubbing his fingers against his cheek.

"You're a pain in the ass, you know that?" Tony asked.

"So you've said," Loki replied.

Tony glowered at him for a moment before reaching into his back pocket for his phone. They had a few hours before the press conference and ribbon cutting ceremony for their new business would begin.

Tony frowned at his phone. He dropped it on the counter with a clatter. "Something wrong?" Loki asked.

"No," Tony said. "I'm just thinking we have to start getting ready in a while." Loki said nothing as Tony started winding himself up about the whole thing. He thought about how he'd have to wear the right thing, look over his speech, make boring small talk... He hadn't even showered. He'd need to go back upstairs. Or...he grinned. The sharp movement captured Loki's attention immediately. Tony slid his finger beneath Loki's shirt collar, tracing the ridged fabric as Loki's eyes followed him closely. "You can't wear that to the ceremony."

"I should think not," Loki said pragmatically. He had far more of an appetite for the public image than Tony did, and was looking forward to the press conference a great deal more. He would be moving into a position of power in the city of his defeat, right beneath their arrogant noses.

Tony tugged at the collar. "Let's get rid of it then."

Heat crawled across Loki's skin as Tony traced his finger back and forth in the collar, impatiently waiting. "Then get rid of it," Loki commanded. He made no effort to help Tony as the man yanked the fabric over his head, dropping it to the floor as Loki's arms fell back against his sides. "All of it," Loki said just as imperiously.

"Get up," Tony said. "I'm not pulling your ass out of that chair." Loki didn't move. Instead, Tony stripped his own clothes off, dropping his belt and jeans into Loki's lap. As the god fumbled to catch them before they slid to the floor, Tony started walking towards the bathroom door. "You'd better come. I won't be getting back out to get you."

Tony left the door wide open as he stepped inside Loki's tiny bathroom. He turned the shower on high, steam flooding out from the heavy stream. With a sigh, Tony stepped in, letting it soothe his strained muscles. He wondered if Loki would follow.

Loki was like that, sometimes. Making Tony take the lead with that princely bullshit he was so reliant on. As water poured down his back, Tony dug through the cluster of plastic bottles in the corner. There was scented shampoo with a ridiculous picture of an antlered buck before a landscape of white capped mountains, body lotion that was bubblegum scented, something that looked like it was organic and vegan...Tony heard the shower door open and grinned.

Without looking up he asked, "how did you manage to hoard all of these?" Loki glanced at him and then awkwardly stepped onto the slick floor, carefully maintaining his balance with hands braced against the door.

"I did not hoard them, they were gifted to me." Loki corrected him, water deflecting from Tony's shoulder and spraying him in the chest.

"Well I'm going to go with this one," Tony said, grabbing a shampoo. He took a step forward, closing what little space they had between them in the shower. The water sprayed down on Loki's hair, hiding his face beneath thick black curtains.

"Lovely," Loki said, water getting into his mouth.

"Don't complain," Tony chided him. Loki heard a bottle crack open. "Hold still," Tony said.

Loki closed his eyes and smelled something spicy and rich as Tony's sturdy hands parted his hair back from his face, cupping behind Loki's head. His fingers rubbed little circles at the base of Loki's skull. The man hummed as he started working shampoo into Loki's hair, contentedly taking

his time. This was the first time Loki had allowed him to do so, and Tony was not about to rush.

Tony was careful, making sure the soap didn't get into Loki's eyes, though the god kept them closed. By the time that Tony was ready to rinse the shampoo out, they were standing in the center of the shower, Tony keeping a disorderly, broken tune that faded every time his eyes wandered over the beads of water racing down Loki's sleek chest and pooling in curves of muscle. Loki was healthier now, and Tony was only just beginning to grasp exactly how unwell Loki had been.

He was healthier too, a fact that Loki was well aware of.

Loki made a soft hum as Tony tilted his head back, carefully untangling his fingers from long locks. Never had he allowed himself to be handled so, not in any easily retrievable memory. When Tony's soapy hands worked down to his shoulders he leaned into the lathering motion, daring a glance to see a kind of reverence on Tony's face.

If he was careful, he caught that look on Tony's face often. More often than Tony probably even knew he was doing it.

Loki took the white suds gathering on his arms and worked them against Tony's skin, silencing a muttered appreciation from Tony. If he thought about this too hard it would stop of his own discomfort. He could not think of himself as someone tender. The hot water running down his back and Tony's hands roaming over his wet skin were all that he wanted to think of.

Tony's mouth found his collarbone, and it was all a blur from there. He heard the water pounding against the glass and Tony's hard breathing, felt Tony's hand take the aching length of him as cold tiles pressed into his back and he mirrored the action on Tony, sliding his thumb beneath the swelled head and listening in satisfaction as Tony moaned. When he came, he was at a loss for how many minutes had gone by, and was just dimly aware of the stuffy heat and Tony's forehead pressed against his shoulder.

"— — —Loki," Tony muttered, and the god could not understand him between the running shower and words pressed against skin.

"Luke," Loki said quietly. "From today on."

"Not when we're alone," Tony said, dropping his head back and trying to take a breath of cold air. There was none. He dislodged his prune-like fingers from Loki.

Loki grabbed a bottle of soap and began lathering himself down again. Tony tried snatching it from his hands. It fell with a loud thunk against the floor. Loki reached for another. "Nope," Tony said. "That's my job." He grabbed the bottle from Loki's hands successfully this time.

"Tony, if this is the start of you insisting upon bathing me, I assure you they will not all go like this one."

"Just let me have this, you high-strung bastard," Tony said, snapping open the cap and squirting soap into his hands. Loki grabbed another bottle with such determination that Tony couldn't grin hard enough. As Loki's fingers raked through his hair, the god reminding Tony what a fragile mortal he was, Tony laughed.

It was another twenty minutes until they left the shower. Tony had a spring in his step as he towel dried his hair, more than a little pleased with himself. "Come here," Loki said. Tony paused, half the towel hanging over his face.

Loki was sitting on the end of the bed, fully dried and dressed. His long hair was pulled back into a



sleek ponytail, and the slim business suit he wore was utterly...normal. Designer and modern, but not flashy or grandiose.

His eyes had faded to a dim blue color, and a gray streak of hair ran through his perfectly arranged ponytail. If Tony hadn't known better, he wouldn't have recognized Loki at all. Not at first, at least.

It was the first time that Tony had seen Luke. The stranger opened his arms with the faintest hint of impatience. "This is weird," Tony said. Luke took the towel from his hands and dropped it on the floor, leaving Tony bare. "Can you change back for a second?"

Luke raised an eyebrow, but the disguise phased out a moment later. Tony felt the tension inside him vanish instantly. "I'd kind of like to...see you? Can you do that?" Tony asked.

A smile curled up onto the corner of Loki's mouth. "Oh?" He grazed his thumbs over Tony's hip bones. "Missing me already?"

Tony smiled uncomfortably. "It's just...just..." Tony's traitorous brain was failing him. He needed a way to say it without feeling like he was on a soap opera, and the floundering for words wasn't helping. "Being like this with someone else, it's...awkward," Tony said, hating himself for it. Okay, so, maybe he should stay away from the microphones at the conference today because this was not his best.

Loki's soft squeeze on his hips surprised him. "I can make it so that only you see me as I really am," he said gently. "Would that please you?"

Tony felt the tension uncoil immediately. Loki had spared him from spelling it out, from admitting that it made him feel like he was cheating, whether that was rational or not. He understood, maybe. "Yeah," Tony said, letting go of the anxiety in his chest. "It would."

"You must still call me Luke," Loki said. "Unless you wish to have that pendant charmed to alter your speech, and there is no time for that today."

"I can keep it together for one day," Tony promised him. Loki's gaze fell down his chest, and just before Tony could say something about it, he felt heat bundle against his skin and close in around him.

A new suit materialized around his skin, complete with gold and emerald cufflinks. Tony stretched out his foot, inspecting the new dress shoes. He pressed his foot to the floor. He was definitely wearing a shoe. "Huh," Tony said. "I always thought you were walking around naked and just projecting the image."

Loki made a dismissive snorting sound. "Sorry to disappoint your overzealous mind," Loki said.

"Well, I'm sure you can make it up to me," Tony said.

"Unlikely," Loki said, combing his fingers through Tony's hair. Like fire, magic licked its way through, drying and styling in the same instant. Loki grabbed Tony's shoulders and studied him for a moment. "Shall we?"

"If we have to," Tony said. He snagged his phone from the counter before joining Loki at the security door. "I need to find you brooding down here more often," Tony said.

"I wasn't brooding."

“You were kind of brooding,” Tony said.

Loki rolled his eyes, ignoring the triumphant grin on Tony’s face. It was better than admitting that it was sentiment that had brought him down here, not some sort of brooding.

There were three people lined up before Tony had to speak, and then it would be Loki’s turn. Tony heard maybe half of what they were saying. Some of his attention was going towards figuring out how Loki could be so wrapped up in the entire thing—he knew political preening when he heard it, so Tony couldn’t quite place why Loki was interested, no enraptured—and some of his attention was on the Avengers in the front row.

They were all there, even Clint, who grinned and winked impishly when he caught Tony staring. Jane’s voice floated over the crowd of reporters, and just as her speech came to an end, Tony noticed Rhodey taking a picture with his phone. He knew Rhodey would be texting it to him. Steve grinned when Tony met his eyes, nodding.

Steve had become especially supportive of Tony and Loki in the time since Loki’s return. Tony wasn’t about to question it. Steve seemed pleased and it worked. Things finally seemed to have settled down around the tower.

When it was Tony’s turn he hurried through his speech, filling it with the kind of garbage he had learned to say over the years. He just wanted to cut the ribbon and get down into the new labs.

It was Loki’s speech that surprised him. Commanding, sincere, inspiring even. Tony sat in awe. It should’ve been obvious to him that Loki would be good at it. Of course he would be. Yet seeing it in action was something else entirely. The otherwise twitchy and anxious reporters were just as rapt as he was, and Tony knew that Luke would be getting a few offers for very private interviews the moment it was over. He scooted his chair a little closer to the podium.

Loki’s hand slid over his as Tony slipped the red ribbon between the sharp scissor blades. “Ready?” He asked.

“Immensely,” Loki said. His hands held warm over Tony’s as the blade snipped with a metallic slice that rang in their ears as it was echoed in several places along the ceremonial line. Jane grinned as she tucked her scissors by her side and flashes fired, capturing the new start.

“You made a good choice.” Tony looked up from his phone to see Pepper standing beside him, a clipboard tight against her chest. “He’s a great speaker.”

“Yeah. He is, isn’t he?” Tony agreed, looking back over his shoulder. Loki was talking to Jane and Bruce a few feet away. The new facility’s lobby was crowded with people.

“It looks good in the media,” Pepper said. She’d read the tweets and articles already. The press conference hadn’t even been done ten minutes and the information was everywhere.

“That’s great,” Tony said. “That’s really great.” He didn’t have much that he wanted to say to Pepper outside of their working arrangements. She must’ve felt the same because she started to scan the room, but Luke had already started walking towards them.

“Luke, this is Pepper Potts,” Tony said. Luke extended his hand, which Pepper accepted eagerly.

“I’m sorry that we couldn’t meet before this,” Pepper said. “I’m glad to see you’re feeling well now.”

“Yes, I’ve made a full recovery,” Luke said. There was a strong presence behind his eyes, but his demeanor was indifferent and aloof. “I’m certain we’ll have plenty of time to be acquainted as our companies progress,” he said. He glanced over at Tony, and it was as plain as day that was where his true interests laid. Unaware of the display, Luke turned back to Pepper as diplomatically as ever. “I look forward to it,” he said.

It was polite. Standard. Unfeeling.

“There’s a charity gala in April. Maybe your company could partake?” Pepper suggested.

“We will certainly consider it,” Luke said. “Thank you for the invitation.” He wrapped his arm around Tony’s waist in preparation to guide him elsewhere. They had been talking about touring the new facility and he was excited to start.

To Tony, Pepper looked a little crestfallen, or disappointed, but then he realized that he wasn’t really sure what Pepper was thinking anymore. Maybe he only wanted to imagine that. “Thanks for coming today. Let me know how the media stuff goes, okay?” Tony asked. “I’ll see you at the next board meeting.” Pepper nodded her head.

“It was nice meeting you,” Luke said.

“You too,” Pepper said. Luke turned and left with Tony at the natural end of the conversation. His fingers flexed against Tony’s silky suit jacket as he told Tony that Jane was waiting to go down to the lab, and had he seen Banner?

Tony pushed the doors leading to the labs wide open, Jane, Bruce, Selvig, and Loki beside him. Jane hurried in, her heels clicking cheerfully against the floors. “Wow!” Her voice echoed across the room. She started up the computer screens before Jarvis could come to life, insisting that he help her.

“You’ve really outdone yourself,” Selvig said, taking a seat beside Jane.

“Billionaire,” Tony reminded him.

Grateful to be out of the crowd, Bruce took a seat with them. He stayed carefully out of Loki’s range, only because he didn’t need the other guy getting excited. “I don’t know how I’m going to function in a lab without Dum-E trying to help,” Bruce said.

“I’ve always thought that Dum-E could use some siblings,” Tony said. “I never remade his twin.”

“Or you could just let him hang out here,” Bruce suggested.

“I’ll think about it,” Tony said in a tone that was quite the opposite. Loki’s arm found his waist again. “We’re going to break from the group,” Tony said. “It’s a little too touristy for us.”

Even before they left the lab, the other three were already animatedly speaking, throwing open cabinets just to look inside and discussing everything they were going to do.

Tony and Loki worked their way upstairs, walking leisurely down dimly lit hallways. In a few weeks they would be abuzz with activity, but for now they were quiet and empty. Tony slipped his

arm around Loki's back. "You're doing all the PR from now on," Tony said fondly.

"As if I'd let you do it," Loki said, leaning against Tony. "You forget that I've seen how you handle the press."

"What? How?" Tony asked.

"Jarvis," Loki said.

"The traitor," Tony said.

Loki laughed softly. "Though I must say, some were impressive."

"I'm not going to let you forget that you said that," Tony said. Loki grinned, taking another step on the tiled floor. They passed framed black and white photographs. "When'd you watch those anyway?"

"You forget that I had a lot of free time," Loki said.

"And you spent it watching my old press stuff?" Tony asked, the flattery already swelling in his ego.

"I was very, very bored."

Tony laughed. "Nobody's that bored."

They stopped in front of two large oak doors. "Do you want to do the honors?" Tony asked. Loki's hand slipped away from him, reaching for the handles. He pushed the double doors open in one graceful motion.

A grand room opened before them. An imposing desk sat in the center against the back wall, the company's emblem above it. The chair was almost throne-like, with sweeping arms and gold gilding around the black leather upholstery.

Loki felt something catch in his throat. It was almost Asgardian, in the best possible way, and he had no idea how Tony had managed it. Sweeping rows of bookshelves occupied the far walls, and two magnificent windows showcased the expansive city beyond. "Do you like it?" Tony asked against his ear.

Loki's lips quirked up into a thin smile. "It will suffice," he said.

"Months of planning and it will *suffice*," Tony mocked him. Loki shot an approving grin over his shoulder and took long strides across the room. He sunk into the chair with a satisfied sigh.

"Easy there, Rudolph. If that horned helmet starts making an appearance and I hear creepy laughter late at night, you will be moved to the intern's desk."

"I thought you were fond of that helmet."

"Not when it's an accomplice to a James Bond villain," Tony said defensively. Loki's gaze swept across him before he turned, settling his attention on the emblem behind him. He had helped Tony design it. Though it appeared abstract, Loki had woven meanings of his own within. "What're you thinking?" Tony asked.

Loki traced the golden patterns in the design. He answered slowly. "I suppose I'm thinking that I have made it."

Tony walked over. He sat down on the desk beside Loki. “Yeah,” he said. The sunlight from the windows illuminated the edges of the design, lending it a surreal edge. “I know what you mean.”

He undid the first button in his shirt after loosening his tie. “I wasn’t sure for a while there,” Tony said. Loki’s hand came back and settled against his knee.

“Nor I,” he said, so low that Tony wasn’t sure he’d heard it.

Companionable silence embraced them. When Loki finally spoke, his voice level and without pretense. “And where will we be going from here, Tony?”

“Anywhere we want,” Tony said. He leaned back on his arms, his chest broadening. Loki turned his head, his gaze settling on Tony’s face.

“That’s it?”

Tony grinned. He leaned forward and kissed Loki on the forehead, fighting back a smirk as he saw that familiar fluster in Loki that the god was always so bent on concealing. Loki squeezed Tony’s knee as a soft breath broke free of his throat. Loki grinned. Tony returned to his comfortable reclining on the desk.

“That’s it.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!! All of your comments and support have made this story so much fun to tell. I started out thinking I’d finish this around 25k, and here we are at almost 145k. These two won’t let me go. Thank you for letting me take these characters where I did, and tell the kind of story it was. I’ve started looking for a new job since writing this and it’s been great to have this here.

If you get a moment, please let me know what you liked, or memorable parts, your favorite things, or whatever you’d like to share. Constructive criticism is welcome too! I strongly suspect I’ll have new frostiron fic up sometime in the near future, I’ve been in the mood to write an ace!Loki fic among other things. Maybe some /Jane fic, since I started that. Thanks for taking this journey with me. Until then! :)

Works inspired by this [one's Pendant](#) by [Vvulpes](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!